

on writing romance

how to craft
a novel that sells



Leigh Michaels

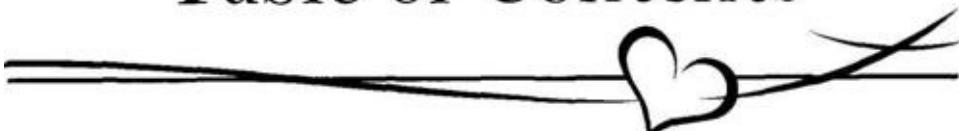
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Preface



When I was fourteen years old and a freshman in high school, I wrote my first romance novel. It was painfully derivative and naive, and despite the number of years that have passed (and let's not go into that, please), it's painful even to think about it now. Thank heaven I maintained enough good sense not to let any of my classmates read it.

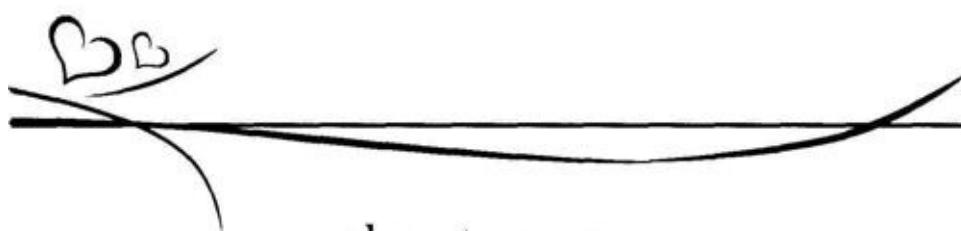
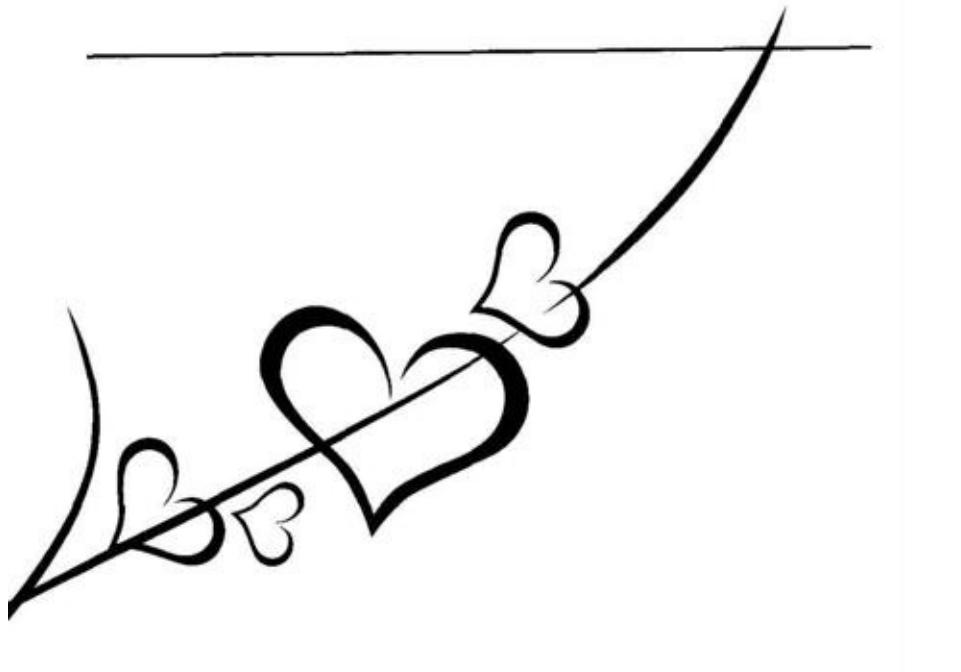
In the dozen years after that first effort, I wrote five more complete romances—and burned them all, sending more than a quarter of a million words up in smoke. I've never regretted burning those books—in fact, I'm awfully glad they're not hiding in a closet to embarrass me someday—but I do regret that it took me so long and so many tries to get to the point that an editor could look at my work without bursting into giggles.

When I first started writing, I'd have given anything to have the book you're now holding in your hands—a step-by-step guide to developing and writing a romance novel that works, a love story that brings readers to laughter and tears.

On Writing Romance is the distilled wisdom I've gained from writing eighty successful romance novels (and from writing that armful of unsuccessful ones), and from teaching romance writing to hundreds of students, many of whom have gone on to success with commercial romance publishers. While *On Writing Romance* is intended mainly for writers working on romance novels, the techniques are useful to all those who include romantic elements in their books. I hope you will find it helpful!

part one

Getting Ready to Write



chapter one

Studying the Romance Novel



Falling in love has been a prominent theme in literature since people first started recording stories. Romantic love—whether fated, doomed, or happy—has drawn the interest of uncounted generations around the world.

The romance novel, however, is a modern concept. A romance novel is more than just a

story in which two people fall in love. It's a very specific form of genre fiction. Not every story with a horse and a ranch in it is a Western; not every story with a murder in it is a mystery; and not every book that includes a love story can be classified as a romance novel.

WHAT IS THE ROMANCE NOVEL?

Distinguishing a true romance novel from a novel that includes a love story can be difficult, because both types of books tell the story of two people falling in love against a background of other action. The difference lies in which part of the story is emphasized.

In a romance novel, the core story is the developing relationship between a man and a woman. The other events in the story line, though important, are secondary to that relationship. If you were to take out the love story, the rest of the book would be reduced in both significance and interest to the reader to the point that it really wouldn't be much of a story at all.

In contrast, in other types of novels that contain romantic elements, the love story isn't the main focus. The other action is the most important part of the story; even if the love story were removed, the book would still function almost as well. It might not be as interesting, but it would still be a full story.

So let's say you're writing a story about a woman who's being chased by the bad guys, and she falls in love with the bodyguard who's protecting her. Is this a romance novel? Or is it general fiction?

That depends on which elements of the story are emphasized. If the main focus of the story is the chase, what the bad guys are actually up to, and why they're after the main character, the novel is general fiction. If the main focus of the story is the couple falling in love while they're hiding out, it's a romance novel.

The Modern Romance Novel

Though love and romance have long been a part of the literary world, the romance novel as we know it today originated in the early twentieth century in England. The publishing firm of Mills & Boon, established in 1908, brought out the work of such authors as Agatha Christie and Jack London—and also published romantic fiction. The firm soon realized that its hardcover romances, sold mostly to libraries, were more in demand than many of its regular titles. As the years passed, romantic fiction outstripped other book sales by even greater margins, and eventually the firm dropped other types of books in order to concentrate on publishing romance novels.

In the late 1950s, the success of Mills & Boon romances was noted by a Canadian publishing company, Harlequin Books, which began publishing Mills & Boon books in North America as Harlequin Romances. The two firms merged in the early 1970s, with Mills & Boon becoming a branch office of Harlequin. Harlequin began setting up independent publishing offices around the world and started to publish romances in translation. In 1981, the firms became a division of the Tor-star Corporation, a Canadian communications company.

For a number of years, Mills & Boon continued to be the sole acquiring editorial office, buying books mostly from British authors. Though it began publishing American author Janet Dailey in the 1970s, Mills & Boon didn't truly open up to other American authors until the early 1980s.

In the 1980s, Harlequin purchased its main rival, Silhouette Romance, from its founding publisher, Simon & Schuster. Since that time the two companies have functioned with relative independence under the Torstar corporate umbrella, though in recent years the line between the two houses has become less distinct. Other major publishers of romance include Kensington, Avon, Bantam/Dell, Berkley/Jove, Dorchester, New American Library (NAL), Pocket Books, St. Martin's, and Warner. (Appendix E includes a more complete list of current romance publishers.)

For many years, only one brand of romance novel existed, known generically in the United Kingdom as a Mills & Boon, and in North America as a Harlequin. Despite the lack of brand-name variety, however, the stories published under

these imprints were widely divergent. Contemporary, medical, and historical romances were all published as Harlequin Romance or Mills & Boon Romance.

But readers who gobbled up those original romances wanted even more variety, and authors wanted to stretch their wings with different kinds of stories—longer, spicier, more sensual, more confrontational, and including elements that just didn't fit in the short, sweet, traditional package.

Various types of romances began to split off from the long-established core. Harlequin editorial offices in New York City and Toronto began acquiring new kinds of stories, written by new authors. Radically different cover designs and distinctive brand names helped the reader more easily distinguish between the various styles of romances.

Some of those changes were made in response to other publishers, who had noticed the success of the Harlequin/Mills & Boon machine and started bringing out their own romance novels. But not long after those other publishers launched their romance titles, they discovered that a commercially successful romance novel requires more than a simple *handsome male meets cute female* formula. Unsuccessful lines and subgenres soon disappeared from the market. Since then, the romance market has been ever changing, as new lines are brought out and foundering lines and subgenres are abandoned.

At any given time there are at least twenty lines, series, or categories of romance novels (we'll look at the different categories beginning on page 8). The three terms are roughly synonymous, though *series* can also refer to a set of more closely related books (for instance, a trilogy in which each of three books features a different family member). In this book, however, we'll use the term *category romances*.

Category romances are groupings of books that have certain elements in common; for instance, they all involve a mystery as well as the romance, or they are all romantic comedy. Category books are published in sets of a predetermined number of titles each month. Though the characters and story lines are different in each book, romances within each category are packaged with similar covers, and they're marketed as a group rather

than individually. They generally stay on the shelf for a month, sometimes less, before being replaced with the next group of titles.

In addition to the category romances, however, a bookcase full of new single-title romances comes out each month. Single titles are books that stand alone. They are designed and marketed individually, and they stay on the bookstore rack indefinitely.

The one thing all these books—category or single title, suspense or comedy, erotic or sweet—have in common is that, no matter what else is going on, the main focus is on the hero and heroine and their growing love for each other.

Beyond that, almost anything goes. Romances come in almost as many types as there are kinds of readers—from erotic fantasies to inspirational faith-based stories, from historical to contemporary, from dark suspense to light humor, from girl next door looking for Mr. Right to twenty-something city chick looking for Mr. Right Now.

In all cases, however, the love story—not the mystery or the sexual details or the social issues—is the most important part of the book.

STUDYING THE ROMANCE GENRE: GETTING THE FACTS STRAIGHT

Romance novels are the best-selling segment of the paperback fiction market in North America. According to statistics compiled for the Romance Writers of America (RWA), romance novels account for well over 50 percent of mass-market paperback fiction sold in the United States each year. More than a third of all fiction sold in the United States (including mass-market paper, trade paper, and hardcover books) is romance fiction. Paperback romances outsell mysteries, literary novels, science fiction novels, and Westerns. More than two thousand romance titles are published each year, creating a \$1.2 billion business in 2004.

Who Reads Romance, and Why?

Why are romances so popular? There are as many answers as there are readers. And there are a lot of readers—RWA’s 2005 study showed that 64.6 million Americans read at least one romance in the previous year.

Half the readers are married; almost half are college graduates, and 15 percent hold graduate degrees. Women between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four make up more than half the romance-reading audience, but readers range in age from their preteens to over age seventy-five.

A fair number of men read romances, too—22 percent of all romance readers are male, according to RWA—but not many are willing to talk about it. (Some even subscribe to by-mail book clubs in their wives’ names to keep their secret from the mailman.)

Romance is just as popular in other countries as it is in North America. Harlequin Books publishes in 25 languages and in 120 nations, and counts its readership at more than 200 million individuals worldwide.

For readers worldwide, the attraction of romance novels seems to be that they provide hope, strength, and the assurance that happy endings are possible. Romance makes the

promise that no matter how bleak things sometimes look, in the end everything will turn out right and true love will triumph—and in an uncertain world, that's very comforting.

False Perceptions and the Reality of Romance

The detractors of romance novels—usually people who haven't read any—often say that the stories are simplistic and childish, and that they contain no big words and very little plot—just a lot of sex scenes separated by filler and fluff. A common view of romance is that there's really only one story; all the authors do is change the characters' names and hair color and crank out another book.

Critics of romance also accuse the stories—and their authors by extension—of presenting a world in which women are helpless. Romance, they say, encourages young readers to fantasize about Prince Charming riding to their rescue, to think their only important goal is to find a man to take care of them. The books are accused of limiting women by idealizing romantic relationships, making women unable to relate to real men because they're holding out for a wonderful Harlequin hero.

In fact, rather than trailing behind the times, romance novels have actually been on the cutting edge of society. Long before divorce was common, for instance, romance novels explored the circumstances in which it might be better to dissolve a marriage than to continue it. According to Mills & Boon historian Jay Dixon, the books "have always argued, along with some feminists and often against prevailing ideology, for no-fault divorce."

Even early romances often featured working women and emphasized the importance of economic independence for women. While some heroines are indeed young, inexperienced, and in need of assistance, the usual romance heroine is perfectly competent. Finding her ideal man isn't a necessity; it's a bonus.

Modern romance novels tell a young woman that she can be successful, useful, and valuable on her own; that there are men who will respect her and treat her well; and that such men are worth waiting for.

Rather than presenting women as weak and helpless, romance novels show women as holding the ultimate power. The heroine tames the hero,文明izes him, and helps him to embrace his softer and more vulnerable side. As romance novelist Jayne Ann Krentz wrote in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, her study of romance novels, "the woman always wins. With courage, intelligence, and gentleness she brings the most dangerous creature on earth, the human male, to his knees."

When you look at romances on the bookstore shelves, it's easy to see why people who don't actually read them might think that all romance novels are alike. Each book published in a specific category, such as Harlequin Presents or Silhouette Intimate Moments, will have a similar cover design, and all the books in a particular category will have exactly the same number of pages. So how, the skeptic asks, can the stories possibly be different?

A soup manufacturer uses the same colors and design on every label to catch the

consumer's eye and assure her that she's getting brand-name quality, whether

she's buying bean soup or corn chowder or cream of tomato. In the same way, the specific theme of a romance cover design tells the reader that this story will be the same type of story she enjoyed last month.

All the books in a particular category have the same number of pages to allow for economy in printing, packing, and shipping. Because the publisher doesn't have to adjust the press for each new title, or buy different-sized boxes to ship different books, it can keep costs in check and pass the savings on to the consumer through lower retail prices. But books with the same number of pages don't necessarily have the same number of words; margins, type size, and line spacing can be adjusted to meet the required number of pages.

So Is There Really a Formula?

Many people believe not only that romance novels are all alike, but that they're simplistic and formulaic. Romance novels are usually small—they're shorter than many other kinds of novels. They're also light—they focus on an entertaining story with an upbeat ending, rather than on such things as the evils of modern society. (Though they don't ignore reality, they don't dwell on violence.) They're also easy to read—the story is told in a way that is effortless for the reader to comprehend.

Because the books are small, light, and easy to read, some critics and even some readers think they are easy to write. Nearly every romance reader says, at one time or another, "I could write one of these." Almost every romance author has been asked to provide the simple magic formula for writing a successful book.

It's true that all romance novels have certain elements in common. All mysteries have certain elements in common, too—a crime, a perpetrator, an investigator, and an ending in which the crime is logically and clearly solved. But mysteries aren't all alike, and neither are romances.

What romance novels have in common is this: A romance novel is the story of a man and a woman who, while they're solving a problem that threatens to keep them apart, discover that the love they feel for each other is the sort that comes along only once in a lifetime; this discovery leads to a permanent commitment and a happy ending.

That's it. That's the formula.

And even then, there are exceptions. For instance, there are gay romances, and there are romances that don't include a permanent commitment as part of the ending.

Today's romance novel allows an author wider latitude than ever before. Romance readers—and writers—have their favorite types of books. Just as a reader of mystery expects she will not be getting an Agatha Christie drawing room mystery when she picks up a new Janet Evanovich or Sue Grafton novel, the romance reader knows Nora Roberts, Julia Quinn, and Jennifer Crusie aren't going to produce the same kind of stories.

Let's take a good look at the most popular types of romances and their guidelines.

KINDS OF ROMANCE NOVELS

Entire volumes—how-to books as well as reference books—could be written about the many categories of romance novels. The list that follows is intended not to take the place of in-depth study, but to introduce you to the wide variety of romances available in the industry today and to share some of the basics about the advantages, disadvantages, and challenges involved in writing specific romance categories.

As the romance industry grows and matures, various types of romances wax and wane in popularity. Some memorable, though now defunct, categories include Silhouette's *Shadows*, which featured paranormal plots verging on soft-core horror; Harlequin's *Lucky in Love*, which required a main character to suddenly strike it rich; Berkley's *Second Chance at Love*, which starred older, widowed, or divorced heroes or heroines; and Bantam's *Loveswept*, which was an early step toward more erotic romance.

The most common romance categories are listed below, along with their defining characteristics. (Because guidelines vary between publishers, the word counts listed here are wide ranges.) For a list of publishers and the specific sub-genres they are interested in buying, see Appendix E. An up-to-date list of publishers is also available at www.leighmichaels.com.

Anthology: Made up of three or more novellas with a common thread or theme, each by a different author. Some anthologies are based on holidays (Christmas, New Year's Eve, Mother's Day, Valentine's Day), while others are based on a theme (stories about the same dress or necklace or quilt as it is passed down through a family; stories about the bridesmaids at a big wedding; stories about witches). The majority of anthologies are historicals, the Regency period being the single most common setting.

Most anthologies are commissioned by publishers who ask established authors to write the novellas, although some anthologies are proposed by one or more of the authors. Anthologies are not usually open to beginning authors.

Word count: 25,000 to 35,000 for each novella

See also *Historical, Regency*

BODICE-RIPPER

A derogatory term for all romances. Inspired by some early historical romances that featured rape fantasies or included rape as a part of the plot, the term is occasionally still used—usually by people who don't read the books.



Chick-Lit: Builds on the success of television shows, movies, and general fiction about twenty-something women who are often more interested in building a career than in finding Mr. Right. In fact, *many* of these young women aren't even pretending to look for Mr. Right, but they're quite interested in Mr. Right Now—someone to date, maybe to live with, and perhaps to marry ... someday.

The heroine is younger—usually in her mid-twenties—and less well established than more traditional romance heroines. She's more likely to live with roommates and work at a dull or entry-level job. Chick-lit stories break some of the other common rules of romance as well. The heroines might smoke, binge-drink, sleep with more than one guy, swear like a sailor—all things that aren't commonly associated with romance heroines.

The ending may involve an understanding between heroine and hero, or the story may end with the heroine uninvolved in a relationship but more mature. The storytelling style is different as well. Many chick-lit books are written in first person, some are in present tense, and most are up-front, breezy, and less introspective than the average romance. Word count: 90,000 to 100,000 See also *City Girl, Hen-Lit, Mom-Lit*

Christian: A common but mistaken term referring to inspirational romance. There is no Christian romance category as such, even though most inspirations are based on Christian philosophy and belief. See *Inspirational*

City Girl: A variation of chick-lit, featuring a heroine who is a little closer to the heroines of traditional romance. The city girl is not likely to smoke, drink heavily, or sleep with more than one man during the story. Like the chick-lit heroine, she may not be looking for a lifetime love, but she's more apt to find her perfect mate than the chick-lit heroine is. City girl romances are *sometimes* published as mini-series within an established romance category.

Word count: varies, but usually shorter than chick-lit See also *Chick-Lit, Hen-Lit, Mom-Lit*

Continuity: A group of books in which each volume stands alone but also advances a larger, more complex story. The books are written by different authors, each free to develop her own set of characters so long as she follows a “bible” that establishes the larger story. Each author must cooperate with the group to avoid contradictions or inconsistencies. An example is a murder mystery set in a small town; each book follows a different pair of characters and their romance while dropping clues about the crime, which is solved in the last book of the series. A typical continuity includes five to twelve related books, usually published over as much as a year.

Continuities are most often originated by the publisher. An editor writes the “bible” and commissions authors to take on each piece of the story. An author who has sold two or three books to the publisher might be asked to take part in order to boost her career.

Word count: varies by project, but each book in the series will be a similar length

Erotic Romance: A story at the more erotic end of the romance spectrum, with detailed, explicit, and frequent sexual encounters between the main characters, but not usually involving anyone else. If a hero has a sexual encounter with another woman, it's typically brief, early in the story, and not emotionally meaningful; heroines are unlikely to share a sexual encounter with anyone but the hero. Also called *romantica*, this is a very sexy romance focused on the developing relationship between hero and heroine.

Word count: 25,000 to 35,000 for novella; 50,000 to 75,000 for novel

See also *Erotica*

Erotica: Stories emphasizing the details of sexual encounters between the main characters or between a main character and others. Though erotica is sometimes romantic in nature, erotica and romance are not equivalent. Romance emphasizes the growing emotional connection of one couple, while erotica emphasizes sex rather than love and may include characters outside the main relationship. Most publishers who say they're looking for erotica mean the romantic end of the spectrum, with lots of explicit sex between the two main characters.

Word count: 25,000 and up

See also *Erotic Romance*

Ethnic: Involves heroes and heroines of color. Africa American, Native American, and Latino/Latina are most common.

Publishers emphasize the need for authenticity—if the author is not of the same ethnic background as the character, she must be sufficiently informed to make the reader believe that the character is a person of color. Some publishers seeking African-American romance will consider a hero of a different race, but the heroine is always African-American (or a biracial woman who considers herself African-American).

Some ethnic romances play on ethnicity or a conflict of cultures as part of the plot, but in most, the issues and conflicts between the characters are those common in other romances. Most publishers prefer that ethnicity be a background issue rather than a major conflict point.

Both Latina and African-American romances are a growing market, including cross-genres such as ethnic/inspirational, ethnic/romantic suspense, and ethnic/paranormal.

Word count: varies from 50,000 to 100,000 or more

Futuristic: A science fiction offshoot of paranormal, involving romances taking place partially or entirely in the future, often including time travel. Word count: 75,000 to 100,000 See also *Paranormal, Time Travel*

Gay: Romance between same-sex partners. Other than the sex of the partners, there are relatively few differences between gay romance novels and straight romance novels. While they may have a few extra issues, partners in gay romances experience the same sorts of problems as heterosexual partners do, and they must make many of the same sorts of adjustments. A gay romance puts no more emphasis on the details of sexual encounters than a straight romance in an equivalent line would. If a romance involving gay characters emphasizes sex rather than love, or features multiple partners, it falls closer to erotica than romance. Word count: varies, depending on type of story

Cithic. See *Woman in Jeopardy*

Hen-Lit: An outgrowth of chick-lit, featuring older heroines who are more established and perhaps married, but with the same sassy attitude and approach to everyday problems as the chick-lit heroine—possibly including self-destructive behavior. Hen-Lit often

involves a heroine who is unhappy in her marriage and is seeking to either improve or end it. Often the story involves a man other than the husband, who might be hero or antihero. The hen-lit heroine usually doesn't have kids. Word count: 90,000 to 100,000 See also *Chick-Lit, City Girl, Mom-Lit*

Historical: Romances that take place in the past. Most publishers of historicals have preferred books set in Europe or North America between 1066 (when William the Conqueror invaded England) and 1900, but they are now beginning to extend the timeline back to include settings such as ancient Greece and Rome, and forward to include World War I and the Roaring Twenties. A few invite World War II-era stories, but time periods closer to the present (the Vietnam War era, for instance) have proved less popular with readers. It seems that the closer the setting is to the present time and experience, the harder it is for readers to think of the period as romantic.

Historical tend to be among the longest of romance novels, allowing for deeper and more sprawling stories. They can even include social commentary, so long as it serves as background to the love story and doesn't read like a textbook.

Although it's important for a historical romance to be realistic, some elasticity is required for the comfort of the modern reader. Heroines tend to be more independent and heroes more enlightened than people of their time period actually were. While women in the Middle Ages were frequently married by age thirteen, in historical romances, heroines are generally older than that, or the question of age is glossed over. Any torture, grisly warfare, or violence is apt to happen offstage, with few gory details shared with the reader.

Word count: 25,000 to 35,000 for novellas; 80,000 to 120,000 for novels

See also *Anthology, Regency*

Inspirational: Romances revolving around the character's spiritual journey as she discovers or finds her way back to a relationship with a higher power. Inspirational romances are sometimes mistakenly called Christian romances because the religion involved is most often a nondenominational, nonspecific Christianity (usually Protestant in orientation).

Inspirational romance does not have to include religious figures. While the hero or heroine might be a pastor or a Sunday school teacher, he or she is just as likely to be a layperson. Typically, one main character is a believer and the other is not, or is struggling to find or regain faith.

A hallmark of unsuccessful inspirations is a reliance on direct intervention of the supernatural—such as angels or God himself—to solve the character's problems. Inspirations are much more convincing when the character solves her problems by finding strength, courage, and resources within herself and her own faith.

Word count: varies from 50,000 to 100,000

Licensed Theme: Romances that follow a specific theme in a licensing arrangement between a publisher and a commercial venture, such as NASCAR.

Agreements are usually for a limited period of time and cover a limited number of

books, most of which are written by well-established authors selected by the publisher. Each book in the series typically stands alone but follows the agreed-upon theme; books produced under Harlequin's licensing agreement with NASCAR feature racing, drivers, cars, and fans. Such arrangements allow authors to use trademarked and protected terms such as the names of sports franchises and corporations but require extreme care with detail so the licensing entity is accurately portrayed and shown in a positive light.

Word count: varies by project

Long Contemporary: A category romance set in current times, frequently featuring sensuality as a strong element. Long contemporary has a higher word

count, allowing for more subplots, more intense conflict, strong mystery and suspense elements, and a larger cast of characters. Long contemporaries often allow more latitude in the types of main characters and in the scope of their problems—for instance, they can accommodate a hero with a mental illness—because there is more time to create reader empathy for the character.

Each long contemporary category has a very specific identity and unique requirements. Different publishers' books vary widely in sensual content, amount of subplot, preferred viewpoints, and overall type of story.

The main factors distinguishing long contemporary category books from single-title books are length (long contemporaries are usually shorter than single-title romances) and packaging (long contemporaries are marketed as part of a group with similar cover designs rather than as stand-alone titles).

Word count: 70,000 to 85,000

See also *Single Title*

Mainstream: Stand-alone novels (not published as part of a defined category) in which a romantic element is present but not paramount. This story is primarily the heroine's, and even if the romantic elements were removed, the story would still be complete.

Word count: 100,000 or more

See also *Single Title, Women's Fiction*

Medical Romance: Emphasizes medicine as a significant part of the conflict or as a way to bring hero and heroine closer together. At least one of the main characters should be a medical professional. Medical romance is a story about medicine as well as love; it isn't simply a romance that happens in a clinic or hospital, or in which one main character gets a disease.

The most successful medical romances don't focus on just one case; they include several patients' stories as a background to the romance. It's particularly important in medicals to tie up *loose ends*. If a patient has been important within the story, the readers will want to know how she's doing at the end. While it's not realistic for every case to have a Pollyanna-style happy ending, many can be left on a positive note and still be

believable.

Medicine changes so quickly that it's risky to go into too much detail about particular procedures, treatments, or even diseases, yet editors want to see enough specifics to evoke the feel of a real hospital, clinic, or emergency room. A wise author combines medical knowledge and background with timeless elements common to other types of romances.

Medical romance has been a steady seller for more than fifty years, though it's more popular overseas than in the United States. It used to be known as doctor-nurse romance, with—of course—a male doctor and a female nurse in the starring roles.

Word count: 50,000 to 55,000

Miniseries: Books within a romance category that carry on a theme, usually published one per month for a predetermined period of time. Examples include stories set in a particular geographic area, like the Australian outback or the Great Lakes; stories that feature a specific type of hero, like Latin lovers or single dads; or stories that feature a certain plot device, like a surprise baby or a hurry-up wedding. Other than the common theme, the books are not related; each story has a separate set of characters and must stand independently. Some miniseries are written by a single author, but most include a number of different authors.

Most miniseries ideas originate with editors, who ask established authors to write books specific to the theme, although they may also choose books from the range available. A new author may end up in a miniseries if her book happens to fit the theme, but it's usually unwise for a beginner to aim for a specific miniseries because few continue for extended periods of time. In most cases, by the time the first miniseries title hits bookstore shelves, all the remaining titles have been purchased or assigned.

Word count: same as the category the miniseries is published within

Mom-Lit: An offshoot of chick-lit, similar to hen-lit but featuring heroines with families—including teenage or older kids who may be part of the heroine's conflict. The heroine of mom-lit is less likely to indulge in self-destructive behavior, but she still has the sassy attitude and outlook of the chick-lit heroine. Word count: 90,000 to 100,000 See also *Chick-hit, City Girl, Hen-Lit*

Paranormal: A story that includes elements of the supernatural, such as witches, angels, werewolves, vampires, genies, aliens, ghosts, time travel, or extrasensory perception. Usually the setting and one (or both) of the major characters are outside the normal limits of reality.

Readers find it harder to identify with paranormal characters who are extremely different from ordinary people. When creating beings with special powers, keep in mind that their human characteristics are what makes the readers empathize. Consider limiting the uses of paranormal powers in order to keep your character vulnerable and therefore more sympathetic. (Perhaps your psychic can only work after eight hours of sleep, or your witch can only cast spells when there's moonlight.)

Word count: varies from 25,000 for novella to 100,000 for single title See also

Futuristic, Time Travel

Regency: A branch of historical romance, set in Regency-period England and involving the upper classes, often focusing on the main characters' efforts to make or escape the socially acceptable marriage.

Technically the Regency period ran from 1811 (when the Prince of Wales was named regent for his father, the mad King George III) to 1820 (when George III died and the prince became King George IV). For literary purposes, however, it is often stretched from the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805—the beginning of the Napoleonic Wars—to the Reform Laws of 1834, which marked the end of the Georgian era and the practical beginning of the Victorian age.

Regencies are usually short novels and sweet rather than sensual. They often feature humorous episodes as the hero and heroine deal with the details of society. The seamier side of life—poverty, prostitution, crime, and other social ills—seldom appears in the Regency romance. A story occurring in this time frame that involves darker elements or more sensuality is usually longer and is classified as a historical set in the Regency period.

Word count: 25,000 for anthologies, 50,000 to 55,000 for stand-alone books

See also *Anthology, Historical*

Romantic Comedy: A story that involves romance in a humorous setting that can range from amusing to farcical. The most effective humor arises out of the characters—their outlook on life, their perspective on the situation, and often the contrast between them.

Silliness is not humor, and adding jokes does not make a story a romantic comedy. Puns don't work well on paper because they're auditory in nature and easy to overlook on the page. The most hysterically funny joke tends to fall flat when written as if a character is telling it. Slapstick is hilarious in film but difficult to evoke in the reader's mind with only the printed word.

In effective romantic comedy, the humor occurs in a way that doesn't diminish or humiliate the characters. Humor is best when it invites the reader to identify with the heroine, not laugh at her. Effective humor comes about because the characters have a lighthearted outlook on life, so even their biggest troubles are not treated as tragedy.

Since humor works best on a small scale, romantic comedies are usually shorter, smaller books, but humorous single titles are often longer.

Word count: 50,000 to 80,000

Romantic Suspense: A story that includes mystery, suspense, or threatening situations in which both the heroine and hero are directly involved. The heroine of a romantic suspense isn't standing off to the side letting the hero protect her or investigate the mystery—she's right in there pulling her weight. Unlike a mystery or suspense novel that includes a romantic subplot, a romantic suspense novel features the romance as the primary focus. However, the romance usually comes about because of the threat to the characters. The problem is solved and the bad guy defeated by the hero and heroine,

preferably while acting together.

(Though assistance from the authorities isn't forbidden, it's unsatisfying if the SWAT team swoops in from nowhere and wipes out the bad guys while the hero and heroine are drinking coffee and holding hands.)

The biggest challenge in writing romantic suspense is keeping the story in proportion. If the suspense plot overshadows the relationship between the hero and heroine, the book veers across the line from romance into mainstream.

Word count: 75,000 to 100,000

Saga: A long, mainstream novel that follows a female protagonist from early life to old age, often including two generations of her descendants, though she remains the dominant character throughout the story. Romance may be present, but it is not vital. Often the heroine is involved in more than one love affair during her lifetime, and frequently she is shaped by the death or loss of her husband and/or the man she loves. An important element of most sagas is the heroine's drive to succeed in a business she herself establishes and nourishes.

Word count: 100,000 or more

Science Fiction. See also *Futuristic, Paranormal, Time Travel*

Short Contemporary: The most sensual of the category romance lines, though not as sexy as erotic romance. Though these books include consummated sexual relationships between hero and heroine, their emphasis is still on love rather than sex. These books are shorter and focus intensely on the hero and heroine, so there is little room for extra characters or dramatic, complicated plots. Still, it's necessary to have a believable conflict, since one difficulty in creating a very sensual romance is to maintain legitimate suspense about the possibility of a long-term relationship while allowing the characters to indulge in sex.

Word count: 55,000 to 70,000

Single Title: Stand-alone books published and promoted individually rather than as part of a category or themed group of books. They remain on the market and in print longer than category books.

Single title allows the author more leeway in almost every direction. The hero and heroine can be a great deal more like real humans, with bad habits and dark pasts. The bad guys can be more evil in their intent and their actions. The events of the book can be darker, more violent, more intense. The romance or love interest can play a smaller part in the story. The story may be even more of a glitzy fantasy than a category romance, or it may be gritty and realistic. The ending may be low-key and much more practical than the sweeping happily-ever-after of the romance, or it may be even more over-the-top.

Single title and mainstream are similar, and the terms are often used interchangeably, but usually the romantic elements are stronger in single-title books than in mainstream.

Word count: 90,000 to 120,000 See also *Mainstream, Women's Fiction*

Sweet Traditional: The original romance novel, a short book that is highly emotional and maintains sexual tension without including explicit love scenes. Some publishers prefer that the hero and heroine not actually make love unless they're married to each other, while others allow premarital sex. In either case, the emphasis of sensual description is on the feelings, not on the act itself. The sweet traditional tends to leave lovers at the door of the bedroom rather than follow them in.

Sweet traditional often emphasizes family connections or girl-next-door heroines without sacrificing the fantasy aspects of romance. Sweet does not mean sugary. Characters must be realistic, conflicts must be believable and important both to the characters and the readers, and emotional tension must be kept at a high level.

Word count: 50,000 to 55,000

Time Travel: A variation of paranormal in which time-traveling heroes and heroines can go either to the future or the past. As in other paranormal romances, consistency is important in time-travel books. Once the author sets up a rule for how her world operates, that rule must stay in effect unless she can explain why it changes.

Word count: 60,000 to 100,000

See also *Futuristic, Historical, Paranormal*

Woman in Jeopardy: Features a heroine whose life is clearly in danger, often from someone close to her or in a position of trust. The old-style Gothic romance is a good example of woman-in-jeopardy books, but the rules have broadened considerably since Victoria Holt's day. The threat faced by the heroine in a woman-in-jeopardy book is bigger, fiercer, closer, and more frightening than in most romances (for instance, she might suspect her husband, rather than a stranger, of trying to kill her). Woman-in-jeopardy books sometimes include paranormal elements.

At present, this isn't as much a category or subgenre in itself as it is a type of story appropriate for several of the longer romance lines as well as single titles and mainstream.

Word count: 80,000 to 110,000

Women's Fiction: Fiction usually written by women and aimed at a primarily female reading audience, including mainstream and single-title books but usually

not category romance novels. Women's fiction often involves a group of women who may be sisters, friends, co-workers, or enemies.

Word count: 90,000 to 110,000

See also *Mainstream, Single Title*

Young Adult (YA): Aimed at the teenage and even pre-teen reader, these books usually focus on the development of an innocent first love and include few sensual (and no sexual) elements.

Some books in the YA line focus on older teens and may involve realistic situations and decisions about drinking, drugs, premarital sex, etc. Though these books can carry a

message, the successful ones don't preach or lecture.

The time frame for YA books can be contemporary or historical. Paranormal characters appear in some YA fiction.

Word count: varies

READING ROMANCE AS A WRITER

In addition to understanding the various types of romance, it is important to read widely within the romance genre. As an aspiring romance author, you should read the type of romance novel you are writing, as well as other similar categories or types, in order to be familiar with the style and type of stories the editors are choosing.

If you wish to write category romance, it's important to realize that each category has its own very definite identity. Reading the books themselves is the best way to understand and distinguish between categories that seem very much alike. If you don't understand the differences between similar-looking categories, you may end up writing a manuscript that doesn't really fit anywhere.

Even if you wish to write single-title books, you should familiarize yourself with the market and the competition. Though by definition a single-title book stands alone, reading a wide variety of current books will help you discern what factors make a single-title book successful.

To begin your study, visit a bookstore and simply browse the romance section without picking anything up. Stand back from the shelves and notice the variety of romances, looking at how the different categories and types of books are packaged so they are distinguishable from the rest. Which books seem to have similar themes and covers? What catches your eye as you look at the shelves? Is it bright colors, type styles, art?

Now move up close. Take a good look at front covers—colors, designs, titles. What kind of art does each cover use—is it a photograph, a painting, a cartoon, or a graphic design? Read back cover copy. What can you deduce about the books from the appearance of the front and back covers? Does the cover hint at the level of sensuality, drama, humor?

Look inside, check out pages here and there, note the size of type and margins and how the pages are laid out. Is there a lot of narration or a lot of dialogue? Does the page look inviting to read?

Despite the wide range of romance subgenres and categories, the reader has certain expectations of any romance novel. The author who doesn't meet those expectations isn't likely to make it into the bookstore. Now that you have an idea of how many different romance subgenres there are, look at what they all have in common. Read at least ten romances, selecting different authors and choosing from different categories and publishers. Check the copyright page to make sure the books you choose were first published within the last year or two and are not reprinted, ten-year-old titles.

As you read, think about the structure the author has hidden behind the story. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. How are all the heroines alike? How are they different? What can't a heroine be?
2. How are all the heroes alike? How are they different? What can't a hero be?
3. How long are the books? How are the chapters or sections divided?
4. How do chapters begin and end? How many chapters are there?
5. What point of view is used? Whose thoughts can we eavesdrop on?
6. How many characters are there? Are there patterns in supporting characters from book to book?
7. Are there similarities in the development of the plots—in the number and placement of complications, in the *tension*, in the love scenes, etc.?
8. How does the author get the readers involved in the beginning of the story?
9. How is each character first presented to the readers? When does the heroine first appear? When does the hero first appear?
10. How does the author make you care about the main characters?
11. How does the story end? Is it always a happy ending? A wedding?

When you've read a number of books, start making a list of the rules you've deduced. Here are a few samples to get you started:

1. Romances of all kinds have a happy ending, generally with the hero and heroine planning a lifelong relationship.
2. In many romances, the heroine has a best friend who serves as a confidante and allows the author to tell us about the heroine's background, weaknesses, and thoughts.
3. While a heroine or hero can be divorced or have had a previous serious relationship, characters generally don't get involved with a new love interest until the earlier entanglement is finished and they have had time to heal.
4. In inspirational romances, faith is more important than doctrine, so specific religions and denominations are seldom mentioned.

NAVIGATING THE RULES

It's possible that your list of rules will ultimately run into the hundreds, but the reasons for the rules fall into only two main categories. First, the readers of romance novels expect sympathetic, likeable characters. Second, they expect an engrossing, uplifting story. If you look closely at your list, you'll find that nearly every one of the rules fits into one of those areas. Either it helps to create a likeable character or it helps tell the story in a way that holds the reader's attention.

And sometimes it does both. The heroine often has a best friend because it's a good way to show her as likeable, but the existence of that character also lets the author tell some of the story in dialogue between the two friends, which is usually a more interesting storytelling method than simply stating the heroine's thoughts.

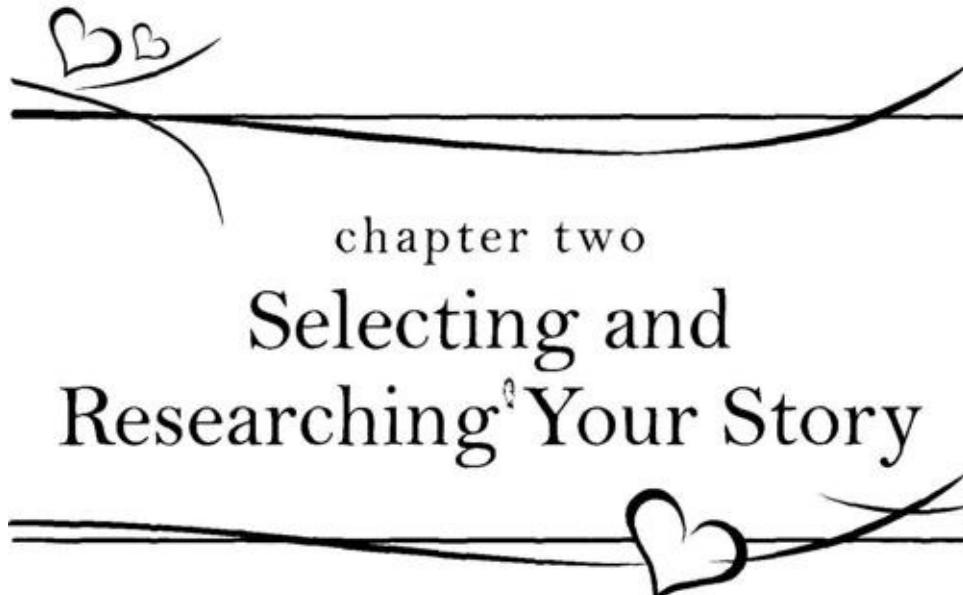
While the rules exist for good reason, it's important to note that there are very few that are sacred. Heroines aren't required to have a best friend to confide in. While it's unusual to have a hero with a criminal past, such a character can still be likeable and sympathetic. Though the majority of romances are told in the third-person point of view, there are a few first-person stories. A hero or heroine who falls in love while still married is rare, but not impossible.

If you are aware of the reasons behind a rule, you can often find a way to break it successfully. You say you want your hero to rob a bank? To actually *do* it, not just be suspected of it? Then figure out how to make him look like a good guy despite his criminal tendencies, and go for it.



IN REVIEW: Choosing the Right Category

As you read your collection of romance novels and construct your list of rules, make note of what subgenre each book falls into. Is there a particular subgenre or type of book you find yourself most attracted to? Of the books you've selected, which stories do you most enjoy? What subgenres do those stories fall into?



chapter two

Selecting and Researching Your Story

Now that you know more about the romance genre and you've been introduced to some of the different subgenres, types, and lines of stories, it's time to start making some choices about your story. What kind of book do you want to write?

SELECTING A PROJECT

Is your book going to be historical or contemporary? Short or long? Category or single title? Paranormal, futuristic, or straight romance? Sensual or sweet?

Having trouble deciding? The first and most basic truth about writing is that a writer should write the story he wants to write. That usually means you should be writing the kind of book you most like to read. The act of writing, *for* most people, is not fun. At best, it's not consistently enjoyable. Good writing—writing a story readers will want to read—is hard work. It is difficult enough to construct a readable story without adding the burden of spending time with characters you dislike, a plot you find dull, a sensuality level you

feel is bland (or shockingly explicit), or a time period you think is boring.

Yet people frequently try to write romances of a type they don't personally enjoy because statistically those types of books enjoy the best sales. The problem is that, even if they finish the story, their lack of enthusiasm will show, and their first reader—the editor—is likely to be the last reader as well.

You will have far more success on a personal level, and when you submit your work for publication, if you're writing a story you love, even if that story doesn't follow all the rules or fall into a distinct genre or subgenre.

There are hundreds of books that everybody knew would never sell, because everybody knew readers simply weren't interested in that kind of story. Except nobody told the readers they weren't interested, and when publishers took risks, they discovered there were indeed readers—sometimes hundreds of thousands of them—who loved those impossible books. (Jean Auel's *Clan of the Cave Bear*—a romantic story set in prehistoric times—is perhaps the best example.)

Not every book will be a bestseller, of course. But books written with love stand a much better chance of being shared with readers.

As you consider the kernel of your story idea, here are some questions to consider:

1. Is this a story you can write? Do you have the experience, insight, understanding, and voice necessary to address this story to this audience? If not, can you acquire those skills?

2. What are your qualifications? Do you possess the skills to write authoritatively about the subject, background, or time period you've chosen?

3. What drawbacks will you face in writing this story? Where can you find the additional resources and information you need to make your story believable?

If you want to write a medical thriller with two doctors as your hero and heroine, but you've never worked in the medical field, the challenge will be enormous. You can do it—but only if you are willing to check every word your medical characters say to each other, and even every thought they have, in order to be sure they're accurate and realistic. Are you willing to put in that much time and effort?

At the same time, don't choose what seems easiest if you don't like that type of story. Writing for young adults isn't easier than writing for mature readers, so unless you spend enough time with young people to understand how they think, writing a young adult romance is probably a waste of time. If your heart lies in his-toricals, you shouldn't choose to write a contemporary just because it sounds less difficult. It won't be easier if you'd rather be in Regency England or the Old West.

4. How can you shape your story to make the drawbacks and challenges more manageable? For instance, if you really want to write that medical thriller but you don't feel confident evoking the doctor's point of view, consider whether you can make your most important character a layperson instead. That way you can still use the medical setting, but you'll have a somewhat easier job creating dialogue and story because not

every character has to think and act like a trained physician.

THE MARKET

Deciding which romance subgenre or category your story falls into can be a challenge. There are many kinds of romances, and each has its own special combination of elements. Some feature pure fantasy; others focus on glitz and glamour;

still others involve grit and realism. The best way to figure out where your story fits is to read the books being published today.

Look especially at the newest authors, those whose first books are on the shelves right now, because that tells you what kinds of stories editors are most likely to be seeking from other new authors. (You can often spot the newer authors by reading the bio page, which often list the titles of previous books.) Here are some questions to consider as you select the appropriate market for your book:

1. How big is your project? The more serious the topic or the more downbeat the main characters' overall experiences, the longer the book will need to be in order to solve the issues and create a realistic happy ending. If your hero has killed somebody, or your heroine's been raped, you'll need more room to develop the story and show the characters growing, healing, and overcoming the emotional baggage they're carrying.

The lighter and more humorous the story line, the shorter the book is likely to be. It's not easy to carry a humorous tone through an entire work, and the longer the story goes on, the more difficult it becomes.

2. Does your story have a universal appeal? Appealing to readers in foreign markets is becoming more important as the global economy grows. As established markets become saturated, publishers are increasingly aware that the strongest potential for future market growth lies abroad.

That means they're looking for stories that will make sense to readers in other countries. Some topics, like American politics and pro football, don't translate well, while other kinds of themes and problems (money, kids, property, honor) are pretty much universal—they could occur anywhere. If your story is one that can only happen in the United States, how can you make it more appealing to foreign readers and therefore more valuable to a publisher?

3. Can you shape the story to better fit today's marketplace? If you want to write a complex book but the word count publishers are looking for seems too short for your story, can you trim some secondary plot lines or restrict the number of characters? If your story is too short to meet the publisher's guidelines, don't pad it with detail or extra people. Think about additional complications for your main characters, ones that would strengthen the conflict and story.

4. What is the story's hook? The hook is the grabber that seizes the readers' attention and makes the book stand out from others on the bookstore shelves. It can be a story type (Cinderella, marriage of convenience), a setting (a town where it's Christmas all year around), or a hint about why the hero or heroine is different ("From special agent to ex-

con"). The hook is usually mentioned in the back

cover blurb, sometimes as a tag line ("The bridesmaid and the best man"; "Caught by a tycoon"; "Their perfect divorce is falling apart!").

What specific angle will hook readers into picking up *your* story rather than one of the hundreds of other new titles released in the same month?

PLANNING THE PLANNING

With a better understanding of the challenges you'll face in writing your story, and with at least a tentative decision on what form it's going to take, look a little more closely at your particular project and do some planning.

But how much planning should you do?

Some authors know their entire story before they begin to write. Some start with the main characters in mind and let the story happen as they go along. Some know all about the problem and plot but discover the characters during the writing process. Some know the ending they're writing toward but nothing much about the story up to that point.

Some authors outline every chapter and/or every scene. Some write detailed summaries of the story, picturing every major event. Some authors keep a notebook with a page for each major scene or chapter, adding notes as they write in order to remind themselves of what needs to be brought in to the next parts of the book. Some analyze each scene with a spreadsheet. Some use a simple list of major plot twists, revising it from time to time with more details or new directions as the story progresses. Some write single ideas or incidents or lines of dialogue on slips of paper, then sort the pieces into what seems a logical order, resorting now and then as the story unfolds.

Some authors write a very sketchy first draft and then rewrite the entire book, fleshing out characters and incidents. Some write scenes and chapters as they come to mind, in no particular order. Some start with page one and write straight through, turning out a nearly finished story.

What's the *right* way? Any of the methods outlined above—or perhaps something entirely different. The right way for you is what works for you, and only by trying out a number of methods can you discover what, for you, is the most efficient, supportive, and helpful.

Don't be surprised if you can't see your entire story at once, because envisioning the whole book before writing a single word is a talent few authors have. Very few books are fully planned in advance. That's what second drafts are for—smoothing out the rough edges, adding the necessary foreshadowing and details, and tying up the loose ends.

Many people find that writing detailed outlines or summaries before starting a book is very difficult. Most prefer to leave their characters some latitude to develop and act in surprising ways. In addition, many authors find that planning so

extensively eliminates a great deal of the joy of creating a story, turning writing into a mechanical process. Others feel secure in starting to write only after the story is

completely outlined so they know exactly what happens in each chapter.

Whatever your style may be, some planning is essential in order to keep the rough edges and loose ends from overwhelming the story. Without an idea of where you’re going, your story is apt to meander and end up fit only for the trash pile.

Writing a book is an enormous project, and keeping in mind from one month to the next precisely what Harry’s supposed to tell John in the beach scene is nearly impossible. Worse, unless you write down the terrific idea you had about how to follow up on the beach scene, you’re apt to forget it entirely when you get to that place in the story.

So whether you use a full synopsis, notes, a sketchy outline, a time line, a spreadsheet, a notebook, or a blackboard, find a way to organize your thoughts. Otherwise you’ll waste a great deal of time—paging back through chapters or searching computer files to find the detail you’re looking for, waiting for inspiration to strike, or doing massive revisions.

WAITING TO WRITE

Planning ahead keeps you from spinning your wheels, speeds up *your* writing process, and eases your work in polishing after you’ve finished the first draft. But you can do too much planning. The biggest folly of beginning writers is waiting to start writing until they have the story completely in mind, until their research is all finished, until they have large chunks of time to devote to the process, or until they’re in the mood or inspired to write.

You’ll never have your story completely planned. And if you wait to start writing until you know you’ve got everything just right, you’re apt to hit a stone wall by page ten and never get any further.

Doing a certain amount of research before setting up your story is both necessary and wise, because it helps ensure you don’t construct *your* plot on an impossibility or a false assumption. But beyond that, it’s difficult to predict what information you’ll need, so start writing and look up facts as you need them.

Waiting until vacation time rolls around so you can devote entire days to your writing is like staying off your bicycle for fifty weeks in a row and then spending the next fourteen days riding across the country. You’ll be stiff, sore, and unhappy—and unlikely to look at the bicycle with any fondness *in* the future.

Many people believe that the best writing is done in a fit of blinding inspiration, in the middle of the night and on a completely unpredictable schedule. In fact, writing is a craft, and inspiration comes most often to those who are sitting in an appropriate place, waiting for it. Readers can’t tell which pieces of a story were written in a brilliant creative frenzy and which were put together one painful sentence at a time. After the book is finished, you may not remember which sections came easily and which were like pulling out your fingernails.

If you write regularly, even for just a few minutes at a time, you’ll be in practice, your story will stay fresh in your mind, and you’ll be in shape to take advantage of bigger blocks of time when you find them.

If you write just one page a day, you’ll have a novel-length manuscript at the end of the

year. Plan ahead so you can avoid the obvious pitfalls, but don't wait to start writing your story. Planning is a great way to *not* write.

RESEARCHING YOUR STORY

"Write what you know" is good advice. When you stray too far from the familiar, you become more likely to incorporate errors into your stories—and most of the time you won't even know it, because you won't have the background to recognize where you've gone wrong. So it's important—without going overboard—to familiarize yourself with some specifics of your story's setting, culture, jobs, ethics, etc. before you start to write. You can't always write what you know, so you have to know what you write.

But what about science fiction? Or time travel? How can anyone *know* about worlds and beings that don't exist or concepts that are only theoretical? What about historical periods? You can't go back to the Wild West to watch what happened, though you can read firsthand accounts written by people who were there. But for more distant times, for which there are few or no records, how can you know how people lived, what they thought, what they ate, what they wore? What if your heroine is the princess of a fictional country? Can only a princess write that story?

Readers pick up romance primarily to experience the love story, but most of them also want to learn something about a place or a job or a time period. What they learn, they expect to be accurate.

And readers come to the story with knowledge and experiences of their own. If what you say disagrees with what they know to be true, you'll lose credibility—and you'll probably lose the readers as well. Once readers catch an author in an error, they find it difficult to trust anything else the author tells them.

That's true whether the author gets something wrong (like calling Chicago's North Michigan Avenue the Golden Mile, when the natives refer to it as the Magnificent Mile) or just misses the obvious (like setting her story right under an elevated train track, calling attention to the proximity of the El, but never having a train rumble by and rattle the windows).

Your firefighter hero would know the difference between carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide—so if you get it wrong, your readers will know that you couldn't be bothered to get your facts right. If you don't take the time to learn

the distinction between a duke and a baron, between Lord Lancashire and Lord Hobert Lancashire, then the readers of your Regency will think you're not smart enough to know the difference—or worse, that you think *they're* not smart enough to know the difference. Your millionaire rancher can distinguish between cows and heifers, bulls and steers, geldings and stallions—so if you have him mixing them up, your readers won't trust anything else you say about ranching.

Accurate research isn't important just for credibility. A few years ago I spent a couple of days in a medical library looking up case studies on carbon monoxide, so I could strand my hero and heroine and have them realistically sickened, but not permanently damaged.

Not long after the book was published, I got a letter from a reader who had thought she was suffering from the flu until she read the story, recognized my hero's and heroine's symptoms in herself, and got treatment—just in time. Two days in a medical library was a peanut-size price to pay for saving a life.

In other words, do your research.

But where do you look, and what are you looking for? When you're drafting your book, you usually need two types of information—general facts you can use to shape your characters and story events when you're in the early planning phase, and more specialized information to ensure believability when you're in the writing phase. Let's take a close look at the various research options associated with each phase.

General Research Strategies

When you're planning your story, your first goal is to gather broad, sweeping, general knowledge about a place or a profession. This type of basic information helps you decide what your characters will do for a living, what events the story will involve, and—equally important—what sort of jobs the characters can't do and what couldn't happen in the story.

This general information typically comes from multiple sources, including many of the following:

Personal Experiences: The best kind of research is personal experience. There's no substitute for being there—and, of course, observing carefully. Obviously, if you want to write a Civil War novel, you can't go back and live in that time period. But you can go to Gettysburg and walk the battlefield, getting a sense of distance and direction and the way the ground lies.

If you're using your own experience, make sure it's both accurate and comprehensive. Jacqui Bianchi, editorial director of Mills & Boon during the 1980s, once (old of an American author who was so enamored of London during a tourist visit that she set a book there. Her heroine met the hero by tripping over a fire

hydrant and tailing into his arms; however, in her single week in the city, the author hadn't noticed that London fire hydrants are below ground, with the covers flush to the pavement. Though that's a fairly simple fix—the heroine could fall over any number of things instead, if she absolutely has to fall—some problems are a lot harder to repair after the book is written.

When it comes to using events from your personal experience—or, for that matter, factual material gleaned from primary sources, case studies, and interviews—it's safe, within certain limits, to have those same events happen to your characters. Just keep in mind that truth is sometimes stranger than fiction. Real life isn't required to be logical, but fiction has to make sense.

Other People's Experiences: The next best source, after your own experiences, is someone else's personal experiences. Find out what your friends are good at, where they've lived, and what they've done. What jobs have they held? Where have they traveled?

Cultivate sources like your lawyer and your doctor, the cop who lives down the street, the fireman who wants to sell you tickets to the annual ball. When you have a question for one of these professionals, you'll be able to phone and ask.

Keep track of what you hear at cocktail parties or the water cooler. Your coworker's reminiscences about his year in the Peace Corps may not fit into a story right now, but there'll come a day when you need specifics, and then you'll know who to call. (And if the person you need to ask already knows who you are, you won't face the problem one writer did when she phoned local drug investigators and asked how much cocaine would fit in a standard adult casket and what the street value of that amount would be.)

Most people are flattered by requests for information and eager to help, especially when you say you're asking because you want to portray their profession or experience correctly.

Often the most helpful information pops up when you give your sources a basic scenario you'd like to use, because they'll do their best to tell you what's possible and not possible, and how to bend that specific event to make it work in your story.

Primary Sources: If you don't know anybody who's been there and done that, look for primary sources—materials written by the people who actually lived through the experience. The best written sources are both original (written by the people who had the experience) and contemporaneous (written at or close to the time of the event, rather than as a memoir years later, when memory has faded).

But primary sources are useful not only for researching historical novels but for creating contemporary settings. For instance, autobiographies can shed light on today's professions. When a person writes about how he learned to do his

job, he doesn't just detail his successes; he talks about the pitfalls and pratfalls as well—the most challenging classes, the tricks played on him by his co-workers. Those details offer fertile ground for the writer's mind.

Look for accounts of direct personal experience, not speculation by an outsider, interpretation after the fact, or self-serving memoir.

Case Studies and Interviews: Case studies and interviews, like primary sources, are accounts of real events and real people, though they usually aren't written by the people who actually lived through the events. A case study includes interpretation by an authority or expert. While conducting an interview, a reporter or oilier interviewer guides the interview subject to share the most interesting bits of information about his experience.

Case studies can be particularly helpful when you need medical details. If you want your hero or heroine to come down with a disease, look in the library of a nursing school or medical college. You'll find volumes detailing real patients' symptoms, how they were diagnosed, what the treatment was, whether there were complications, and how the cases turned out.

Textbooks, Guidebooks, How-To Books, and Instruction Manuals: Textbooks can give you a quick survey of an enormous field of study and direct your further research

efforts. Browsing through a textbook will give you ideas about what a character who specializes in that field would be good at—or not be good at. New textbooks are expensive, but you can often read them in college libraries or buy fairly recent textbooks at charity used-book sales, where they often go for a dollar or less.

Guidebooks give elaborate details about geographical locations—how likely it is to rain there in October, how hard it is to get a cab, what political stance is held by the local newspaper, what strange things you might run across in a local museum.

How-to books can be a great source of ideas for creating action for your characters. If your hero is fixing a faucet while talking to the heroine, a how-to book can give you specific details that make the picture realistic for the readers.

Instruction manuals give information about a product, which may or may not be useful—but the troubleshooting section is full of ways to complicate your character's life.

A particularly helpful resource for most romance writers is an old etiquette book. Editions from the 1920s and earlier go into elaborate detail about things like running a big household, giving dinner parties, following courtship rituals, and training servants. That information can be useful not only for authors of historical novels but for those writing contemporary romances that involve wealth, glitz, and glamour.

Children's Nonfiction Books: If you're looking for a quick way to familiarize yourself with a subject, look in the children's or young adult section of the library.

Nonfiction books written for young readers tend to be well organized, specific, and factual, giving the main points without drowning readers in details. If you want to set your book during the Revolutionary War but you're not sure exactly when and where, the children's section of the library is a good way to get an overview.

The children's section won't offer all the depth you need, but you can find out the basics in a short time. Once you figure out which direction you want to take, it will be easier to locate the specific materials you'll require.

Fiction: Some authors of fiction are so meticulous with detail that they could write the handbook for their subject or historical period. Others aren't nearly so reliable. If you've picked up some general knowledge from reading fiction, don't count on the author being correct—check everything out yourself.

Other Media: Details from audiotape and film can give your readers a realistic, I-am-there feeling that can increase the emotional impact of your story. Remember, though, that video and film are only as good as their source material and editing. Whenever possible, go the extra step to check that the producers got the facts right and that they reported the entire story.

One problem with using tape and film is that, without elaborate editing equipment, it's more difficult and time-consuming to find a particular moment, picture, or quotation on tape than to simply look something up in a book index.

The Internet: The Internet is a phenomenal resource, one that can be overwhelming to the researcher. Unless you strictly limit your searches, you're apt to be buried in

references. Most of the references will be less than useful, and all will tempt you to surf instead of working. But if your search terms are precise, the Internet can be the best place to find arcane, specific detail. It's less useful, however, for the sort of general exploratory research you need to do before starting a story.

As with film and video, material on the Internet is only as good as the source. Make sure to check out the data before assuming it's correct. There are many professional-looking but inaccurate Web sites.

The Internet can be an excellent way to borrow personal experience. Putting out a question on a bulletin board may bring back precisely the detail you need about a job, hobby, or geographical area. Again, consider whether the source is knowledgeable and reliable.

A comprehensive list of interesting and useful research links is available on www.leighmichaels.com.

Specialized Research Strategies

It's easy to get so caught up in study, trying to learn everything there is to know about a subject, that you never get your story off the ground. That's why it's best to save the more detail-oriented research until after you've done the general research and started the writing process. Specialized research strategies enable you to search for specific facts or bits of information you may not realize you need until you're deep into your story. What might prompt you to dig a little deeper? Check out the following:

REAL (AND NOT-SO-REAL) PLACES

Choosing your own surroundings for your setting can be a great benefit. Since you already know the setting, you don't have to search out the essential details that evoke the location for the readers. It's one less thing to look up, one less thing to distract you from the story you're writing.

Writing about your own surroundings can also be a big disadvantage. Since you already know the setting, you may find it difficult to step back far enough to see the important, telling details that the readers will want to know.

It's often a good idea to fictionalize your own surroundings if you live in a small town. If you want to set your story in a small New England town, make it an imaginary one. Then you can draw on your experience of living in a small New England town without being limited by the reality of your particular town.

If the city you live in is large enough that nobody knows every main street, important building, major business, or neighborhood, you don't need to fictionalize the setting. (In practical terms, that means you should fictionalize any town with a population of less than about a hundred thousand.)

Even when using larger cities, however, it makes sense to fictionalize any element—such as a street, story, or building—if details about the real thing are hard to get or easily proven wrong. If you want to use a famous skyscraper as a setting, getting pictures of the interior for realistic descriptions may be difficult, and anybody who's even vaguely familiar with the real layout will know if you're faking it. Creating your own skyscraper leaves you free to visualize the real one while arranging apartments and offices exactly as you like.

If you're setting your book in a large-scale fictional location, like a made-up country, consistent and realistic details can make your entire story—and inconsistencies or gaps can break it. Modeling a fictional country on a real country (or a combination of countries) usually results in a more convincing setting than making up a nation out of thin air. You can know a great deal about how your fictional government operates, or how

your royal family ascended to the throne six hundred years ago, without sharing all that detail with your readers. But figuring it out—even if it doesn't apply to the specific story—will help you avoid inconsistencies and make your story feel more real.



Laws, Legal Issues, and Established Traditions: Many romances deal with legal issues—ownership of property, child custody, lawsuits, inheritance—so familiarizing yourself with legal basics early in your writing career may prevent you from wasting time and effort on impossible plots.

For instance, if you're writing a story in which your hero and heroine get married on two hours' notice, you'll need to know which states permit that and which don't. If you

don't know before you start writing, you're apt to set your story in a state that requires blood tests and a waiting period, and you'll have a big job of revising to make the story fit the facts.

If you're writing about a divorce attorney, you'd better know right up front that she could lose her license if she starts dating the client she's representing, or you're apt to create a story scenario that simply won't fly.

If you're writing a Regency and you have the duke leave his estate and title to his younger son because the older one's a brat, then you're violating the laws of the time, as well as turning off readers who know about those laws.

Those big issues need to be investigated before you develop a story, so some general reading is a good investment of time. Smaller details—like what identification the couple needs to present to actually get married, or what the divorcing couple might argue over, or exactly what a younger son could inherit—are safe to leave until later, when you know more about the precise picture you want to create.

The larger the legal element is in your story, the more research you'll need to do. If one of your main characters is an attorney, consider reading biographies or autobiographies of attorneys in order to familiarize yourself with the backgrounds and thinking styles of real lawyers.

There are a number of good law reference books, written for laymen, that provide basic background; many list specific information as well. Though your local bookstore may not have a wide range of titles on hand, a quick search through Internet bookstores such as Barnes & Noble (www.bn.com) or Amazon (www.amazon.com) will bring up many useful books. For instance, keywords like *law for the layman* and *legal rights* will bring up books such as the *American Bar Association Legal Guide for Small Business, Know Your Legal Rights*, and many titles dealing with specific areas like real estate and child custody.

Your public library will have general legal references, though they may be somewhat dated, and can order specific books from other libraries through interlibrary loan.

For quick and up-to-date reference, the Internet is hard to beat. A Google search for *marriage requirements* and *states* returned thousands of sites listing the details of the current marriage law in each of the fifty states. Among the top three sites was http://usmarriagelaws.com/search/united_states/, which includes (along with a wealth of other information) the requirements in each state for getting a marriage license. Another good site is www.findlaw.com, which has archives of basic information on every legal issue you can think of.

If possible, cultivate the acquaintance of an attorney or two. Many of them love puzzles and will happily argue both sides of a hypothetical legal question while you take notes (especially if you offer to buy lunch, bake them a pie, or dedicate the book to them).

Medicine: Researching medical questions so your character's health problems are realistic can be as easy as checking www.WebMD.com or as complex as spending days in the library of a medical school reading case studies. Some good basic reference books

include home medical encyclopedias—especially those that index symptoms as well as diseases—and nursing textbooks. Medical-surgical nursing texts are amazingly detailed about common and obscure illnesses and treatments. Nursing schools frequently update their texts, so last year's editions can often be found in charity book sales.

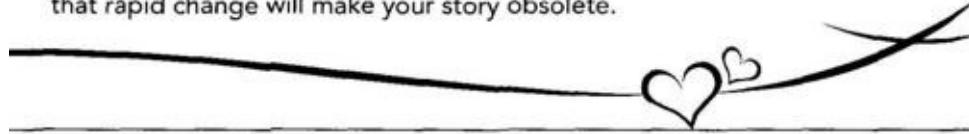
Professional Codes of Ethics: Most professions have ethical codes, written or understood, and those rules affect how characters in those professions can behave. There are, for instance, many ethical considerations in how doctors interact with their patients and their patients' families. If a relationship starts to develop between a doctor and a patient, the doctor may be required to remove himself from the case. There are ethical considerations governing when a doctor can treat members of his family and when he should step aside.

The important point is that, even if the doctor you've created doesn't actually follow the rules, he knows about them. If he violates the ethical code and has a relationship with a patient, he might feel guilty, or sly, or proud—depending on the sort of person he is—but he'll feel something. If you don't know about medical ethics, then no matter how your doctor behaves, he isn't going to be believable to the readers who do.

If in doubt about ethics, ask a member of the profession about what's acceptable and what's forbidden. Can't find someone in the profession? Search the Internet for a professional organization or union and contact the public relations office. Professionals want to be portrayed accurately and realistically, so they'll help wherever they can.

FAST-CHANGING FIELDS

Some professional fields—medicine, technology, computer science—change more quickly than others. Computer-centered plots are not well received by publishers for this very reason. That doesn't mean you shouldn't use fast-changing fields in your story, but if you do choose to use them, proceed with caution. Select details with care, and don't be so specific that rapid change will make your story obsolete.



Researching Historical Romances

An amazing number of people decide to write historical romances without knowing much about the time period they're interested in, and some write without even having a preference for one period over another. Others, in contrast, have done so much research that they have to fight the temptation to write a history text or a sociology study or a language manual rather than a romance.

No matter what the historical period you choose, it's important to know enough about it to portray it realistically. Small, everyday matters usually present the greatest difficulty. Research books don't often go into detail about domestic routine, and chasing down the fine points of how a gown would be trimmed or what the heroine would have worn underneath can be time-consuming. However, including such detail is helpful in creating

the picture in the readers' minds and keeping them absorbed in the story.

There are a number of costume museums around the world, and many have illustrated Web sites that can be of help. The Museum of Costume in Bath, England (www.museumofcostume.co.uk) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (www.metmuseum.org) both display fashions from several centuries on their Web sites. Encyclopedias of world costumes may be available at your library.

There is an increasing number of good reference books that offer specific details on historical periods. Writer's Digest has a series of volumes about everyday life in various historical eras (Regency, Victorian, Elizabethan) that specializes in the down-to-earth details, and books like Daniel Pool's *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles "Dickens Knew* explain such things as inheritance law, criminal justice, and society's rules in a specific time period.

Primary sources are particularly important in historical research. Letters and diaries tell more about real people in a particular historical period than history books can, while newspapers relay not only what was going on but also the relative importance the event had at the time. Letters, diaries, and newspapers can

help you adapt your ear to the vocabulary of the time. Many historic newspapers are available on microfilm through your local library, and front pages for historic dates are published in collections or available as individual reproductions.

Historical fact occasionally collides with modern sensibilities, and in some areas the wise historical author bends fact to fit the beliefs of the modern reader. Women's rights, age at marriage, and personal hygiene are all areas where modern values sometimes clash violently with historical fact. Heroes and heroines of historical romances are apt to be more modern in outlook and action, older, and cleaner than real-life brides and grooms of centuries past.

Many books use real historical figures, with varying success. Georgette Heyer is perhaps the best example of an author who successfully portrayed a historical figure. In *An Infamous Army*, a love story set against the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, she brings the Duke of Wellington to life by using his own words (taken from his letters and dispatches) to create his dialogue.

Though it seems it should be easier to portray real people than to make up fictional ones, it's actually more difficult. When real people appear in fiction, they tend to come across as stereotyped or cartoonish. A real person is best used as a background or secondary character, rather than as a prominent part of the story. If you use real people, keep them consistent to reality—if the real king was a tyrant, then your fictional portrayal won't be believable if you show him as a gentle, misunderstood soul.

Real people can be researched through encyclopedias, biographies, letters, and diaries (either the diaries of the subject or of someone who knew him).

Whenever possible, adapt what your real character says from the records of what he actually said or wrote so his style, words, and attitude ring true. And aim for small

amounts of consistent detail rather than adding a large number of facts.

Another valid approach is to fictionalize a real person—using the basic facts but changing the name and details—so your character doesn't have to match in every respect. Fictionalizing a real person leaves you free to change the person's personality and behavior in order to create the best possible story. This approach is more feasible with moderately well-known individuals than it is with truly famous ones; fictionalizing Henry VIII would be considerably less successful than creating an additional member of the aristocracy in Henry's era.

Make sure the names you choose for your historical characters are appropriate for the time (many baby-name books list well-known people and help to date the origin and period of popularity of the name).

Watch out for objects and locations that haven't been invented or established by the time of your story, and beware of modern words, phrases, actions, and attitudes. A Regency hero carrying a briefcase or stopping at a hotel bar for a drink is the brainchild of an author who hasn't done enough research. A historical hero who tells the heroine to get a life is not believable, while a medieval heroine who

worries about her self-esteem is an anachronism, since the concept of self-esteem is a twentieth-century one.

If in doubt about whether an expression is appropriate to the setting of your story, consult an unabridged dictionary that lists the first known use of a word or phrase. Slang dictionaries can also be helpful in creating dialogue that fits the historical period.

Another useful tool in writing about historical eras is an old encyclopedia. Encyclopedia Britannica's Web site (www.britannica.com) has a Classics section that shares articles from old editions. Britannica also has published replicas of some editions, including a 1771 encyclopedia in three volumes, which went into horrifying detail on subjects like childbirth and the medical treatments of the period.

Researching Paranormal Romances

Logic, consistency, and believability are key when dealing with scientific or pseudoscientific concepts such as other worlds, alien or futuristic societies, time travel, and superhuman characters. Imagination alone isn't enough. Without a solid foundation in reality, the author's alternate universe will not be convincing. There is no substitute for spending time in the classroom (or in equivalent study) to develop a comfort level with basic science.

The author of good science fiction has to be comfortable with the chemistry and physics of this world; then he can use known science as a launching point, following scientific principles and adding his own spin to create a world different from our own but equally logical and believable.

To create believable futuristic societies, it's wise to study past and current sociology, psychology, and political science, then project where past and current trends might logically lead.

If you base your characters' mode of travel to the twenty-third century (or the thirteenth century) on scientific principles, you'll have a much more believable scenario than if you just made something up. In addition, any sort of time-travel method has to be both logical and consistent to be convincing to readers. It isn't enough just to say that the elevator can become a time machine; you will need to explain to the readers how the heroine manages to summon the elevator in 1820 to take her home to 2010.

If you're writing about characters with supernatural powers, it's important to pay attention to legend and common understanding. Read the literature already out there. Your werewolf doesn't have to react exactly like the werewolves of legend, but if he doesn't, you'll need to account for the differences. If you simply ignore the common belief, your readers are likely to think you haven't done your research—and are apt to stop reading.

The more paranormal the world you're creating, the more necessary it is to have logical explanations for everything that happens. Because your readers will be

paying closer attention than usual as they try to figure out the rules of your universe, they're more likely to notice if you slip up and violate your own logic or laws.

Once you set up a rule for your world, that rule becomes like a law of physics and you have to live with it—the rule can't come and go depending *on* how convenient it is to the plot. Once you've set up the conditions that make your time machine work, you can't have it stop working under those same conditions just because you don't want the heroine to time-travel at that exact moment. If your vampires need to seek out a victim with a matching blood type, then you can't later have them ignore that rule unless you have a convincing explanation for why it's no longer necessary.

Your Research vs. Reader Perceptions

Sometimes you'll know your material cold—and you'll be absolutely correct—but your readers' previous experience disagrees. You may know there were cattle drives in sixteenth-century Scotland, but your readers are equally sure you must have been thinking of Texas instead. You may know that in big-city children's hospitals, neonatal doctors work regular shifts and are never more than thirty seconds away from a preemie's incubator. But your readers in West Podunk, where there's a ten-bed hospital and one pediatrician on call in the next county, can't imagine it. It's not much comfort to be right if your readers toss the book aside because they're convinced you're talking through your hat.

In cases like that, the burden of proof lies with the author. You not only have to show the cattle drive or the neonatal doctor, you have to convince the readers that you know what you're talking about. You can do that by making the picture so plain that it's impossible not to believe you. Or you can do it by bringing up the doubts yourself—maybe have a visitor in the neonatal unit ask how long it will take to get a doctor—which gives you a reason to explain.

Your readers may still think you're making it up, but at least they'll know you didn't create the scene out of ignorance.

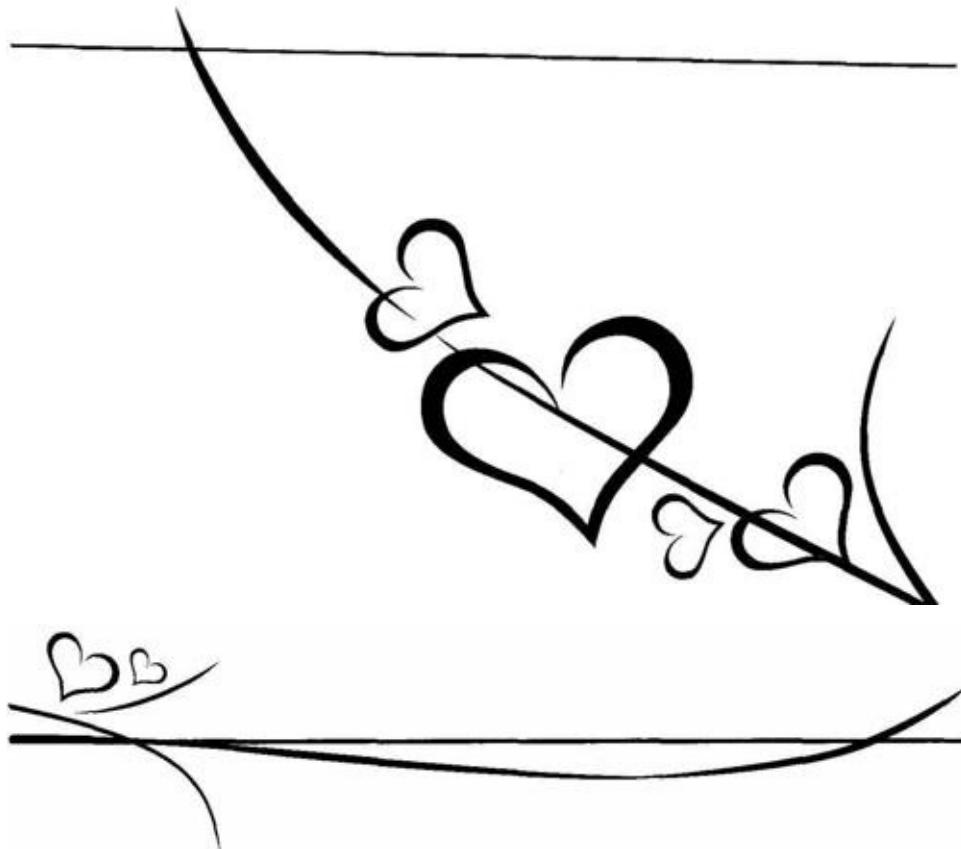


1. Look back at the romance novels you've been reading. What aspects of the stories do you think the authors needed to research?
2. Where might they have found the information they drew on to write the books?
3. What research sources will you need to consult before you're ready to begin writing?
4. What sources might be helpful during the writing process?

part two

Establishing

Your Framework



chapter three

Essential Elements



Even if you're a seat-of-the-pants, explore-as-you-go sort of writer, there are a few things you need to know about your story before you start seriously writing chapter one. Unsuccessful romances—especially the many that writers start but never complete—stall out because the writer didn't know enough about the basic framework that holds every romance novel together.

Though it's nearly impossible to have every detail worked out ahead of time, if you don't have a pretty good idea of your framework, you'll be apt to wander in frustration with a story that goes nowhere. Or you'll write chapter one over and over, trying to make

it work, until you're heartily sick of your characters.

So what are the basics you need to know up front?

Let's review the definition we established for the romance novel: A romance novel is the story of a man and a woman who, while they're solving a problem that threatens to keep them apart, discover that the love they feel for each other is the sort that comes along only once in a lifetime; this discovery leads to a permanent commitment and a happy ending.

This definition summarizes the four crucial basics that make up a romance novel:

1. a hero and a heroine to fall in love

2. a problem that creates conflict and tension between them and threatens to keep them apart

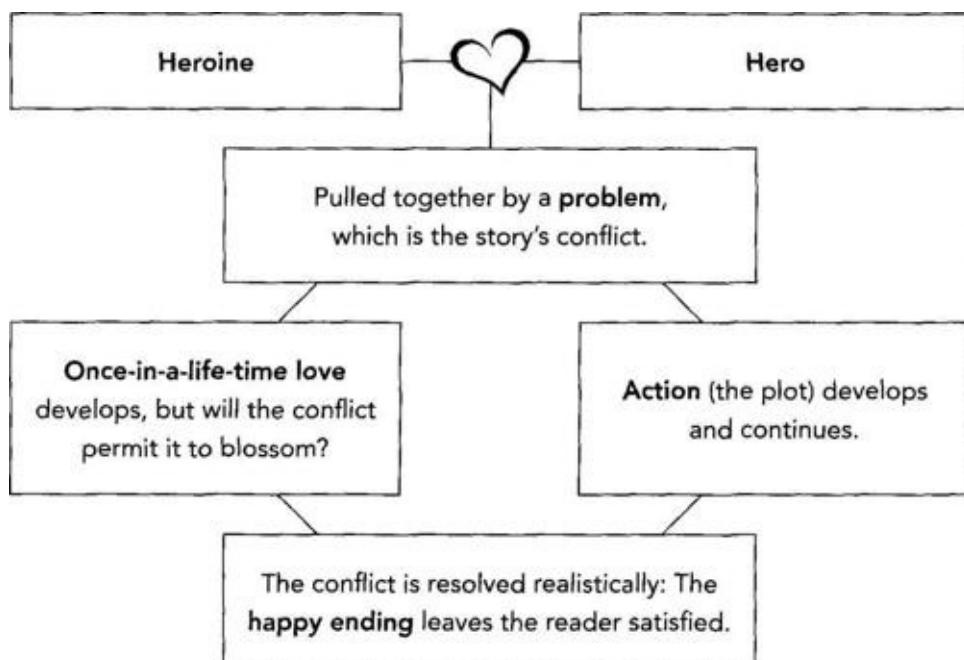
3. a developing love that is so special it comes about only once in a lifetime

4. a resolution in which the problem is solved and the couple is united

These things are the girders that hold up your entire story. Like the steel skeleton of a skyscraper, each piece depends on the others. If one is weak or flawed, the whole structure is apt to fall down.

What your hero and heroine have experienced in their pasts will influence how they react to the problem they face in your story. The nature of the conflict between them will influence their relationship and how the sexual tension develops. The traits that make this couple fall in love will influence what the happy ending will be. If the conflict has no satisfactory resolution, it's not going to be a truly happy ending, even if the hero and heroine fling themselves into each other's arms on the last page.

Knowing the basics up front will keep you from reaching the middle of the book with a limp conflict, no sexual tension, and two characters who have absolutely no reason to want to be together.



HERO AND HEROINE

Without two people to fall in love, there is no story. Since you're asking readers to spend several hours with your characters, it's important to create a hero and a heroine they want to know more about. That means the characters have to be both real (so readers can relate to them on a human level) and sympathetic (so readers feel the time they spend reading the characters' story is worthwhile).

If the readers spend several hours reading the story, most of that time will be in the company of the heroine. So your heroine must be someone the readers can

understand, like, and respect—someone they want to hang around with. Someone who seems like a real person.

The hero must be someone the readers can picture themselves falling in love with. But you want them not just to fall in love with him—experiencing that dizzying, glorious rush of emotion—you want them to *stay* in love with him and believe that the heroine will be truly happy with him forever.

The next chapter, which goes into detail about heroes and heroines and how you can develop your main characters, may be the most important chapter in this book. If your hero and heroine don't come to life for your readers—if they aren't people they care about, root for, and want to be happy—they're not likely to spend their precious time reading a book about them.

Knowing your characters is extraordinarily important. If you don't know these people almost as well as you know yourself, then how will you know how they would react to the problems you've created for them—or to each other? You will sometimes hear an author say something like, "I wanted my heroine to be shaken up by the bad guy making a pass at her, but she just rolled her eyes and said, Yeah, right, like *that's* going to upset me.' So I had to figure out another way to make her turn to the hero for help."

Your reaction might be to wonder if the writer is having a hallucination. After all, the writer creates the character—so how can the character simply refuse to cooperate? What the writer is really saying is that she created a character so believable—so real—that she knows how that person would act or react in a given situation. When she then tries to write a situation that is inconsistent with the character's values or personality, the character just won't go along with the plan.

Chapter four will go into more detail about creating real, sympathetic, believable characters—the first requirement for your romance novel.

CONFLICT

While the developing relationship between the hero and heroine (which we'll address next) is at the center of the story, it is not the entire story. If the main question in a romance novel is simply whether and when the hero and heroine will admit they love each other, then the story will be unsatisfying. Readers know from the beginning that they will, because they're reading a romance. Watching two people date, get to know each other, and slowly explore their growing attraction isn't terribly exciting.

It's the difficulties that surround *this* couple falling in love at *this* moment—the difficulties that threaten to keep them from reaching a happy ending—that keep the readers' attention. The way in which these difficulties impact these particular characters, putting pressure on them and bringing out their good points and their flaws, is what makes their story exciting.

That's the main way in which romance novels differ from real life—in real life, most of us prefer a calm and peaceful period to get to know each other. But calm and peaceful don't make a gripping book. It's the tension between the characters, caused by the problems they face, that makes the story exciting and unforgettable.

Tension between the characters is conflict, the second of our important framework pieces.

In the excitement of creating your hero and heroine and developing your story, it's easy to confuse plot with conflict. The *plot* is what happens while your two characters are falling in love; it's simply the sequence of events. *Conflict* is the difficulty between the hero and heroine that threatens to keep them from getting together. It arises because of the problems the characters face.

Most romance novels have two types of conflict: the short-term problem and the long-term problem. The short-term problem (sometimes called the *external conflict*) revolves around the initial situation that brings the couple together and keeps them together so they can get to know each other. The long-term problem (sometimes called the *internal conflict*) is the deeper difficulty each character faces—the difficulty that threatens to keep the couple from finding happiness together.

In many beginners' stories, the hero and heroine have plenty of problems. He's having trouble with his business; she can't get along with her father; he's got custody issues; she's in debt. But unless these problems cause tension between them, there's a shortage of conflict in the story.

The hero and heroine don't have to be at each other's throats all the time. In fact, it's better if they aren't always disagreeing. But if they agree on everything, if their relationship is calm and peaceful, then what's keeping them from recognizing and admitting they're in love?

On the other hand, if they can't get along, why doesn't one or the other just walk away? Why can't they avoid each other?

Chapter five will investigate conflict in depth—what it is and isn't, and how to develop realistic and believable conflict.

THE ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME LOVE

The need for a romance in a romance novel seems so obvious. After all, the romance novel is a love story—the hero and heroine *have* to fall in love. But if you stop and think about it, this important aspect is trickier than it first appears.

It's easy to write in a synopsis, "As they get to know each other, they fall in love." But showing that love growing is an entirely different proposition. If it happens too quickly,

the readers will be bored. If it happens too slowly, the readers won't believe the happy ending.

Each event in the story helps your lovers see each other differently, discover new traits (good and bad), and get to know each other on a deeper level.

It's much easier to focus on action or to detail the bad guy's plans than it is to portray, step-by-step, the slow flowering of a caring relationship. As you

develop the framework of your story, keep in mind the importance of the characters' reactions to each other. What events will best allow each to see new aspects of the other's character? What is there about each person that causes them to fall in love? What makes this couple so perfect for each other (even though it doesn't appear that way at first) that their love story will remain in the readers' minds forever?

Chapter six will go into more detail about the once-in-a-lifetime love, the third pillar of the successful romance.

THE RESOLUTION

How is your story going to end? I'm not suggesting you have to know every detail—before you start writing—about how your characters solve their difficulties and live happily ever after, but it pays to have a good idea. Having your destination in mind makes the journey easier.

And if your book is to be a romance novel, then the story must finish with a happy ending—a positive, upbeat, hopeful resolution, which in most cases will involve a permanent commitment between the two main characters.

As you're thinking in terms of framework, you don't have to know your characters' street addresses or how many kids they end up having, but do look hard at any big issues you've raised. If your characters' conflict has involved their lifestyles (he loves the country, she wants the excitement of the city), will they compromise or will one of them give in? If he hates her job, how do they resolve the problem so both can be satisfied? If she's had trouble trusting him, how does he prove himself (or how does she convince herself he's trustworthy now)?

The most important thing about the resolution is that the issues—big and small—that have separated the characters are settled in a way that is logical and satisfying to the readers. Each issue is handled rather than avoided; the solutions are plausible and fitting for the situations and the characters, so the readers can believe that this agreement will last and will continue to be acceptable to both main characters. A satisfying ending comes about because of the actions of the characters themselves, not through the interference of others.

Chapter six will go into more detail about planning the resolution of your conflicts and deciding how the issues you've raised between your characters will ultimately be resolved.

THINKING THROUGH YOUR FRAMEWORK

You may not be ready to put on paper all the ideas for your hero and heroine, con-flict,

once-in-a-lifetime-love, and happy ending. After all, you've just started to find out why these things are important to your story.

However, you need to be thinking about these separate elements and how they interrelate as you develop your story.

The questions in the exercise below are good ones to keep in mind as you write. If you find yourself feeling bogged down as you think about your story, go back to these questions. The time you spend in quiet reflection early in the writing process could save you dozens of hours in revising.

If your idea is not yet developed enough to address these questions, that's okay. Keep them in mind as you read the next three chapters, and you'll be pleasantly surprised to find the answers taking shape.



IN REVIEW: Studying the Essentials

1. Look back at the romance novels you've been studying and pick out the essential ingredients of each story—hero and heroine, conflict/problem, developing love story, and resolution.
2. What qualities make each hero and heroine heroic? Real? Sympathetic?
3. What makes each hero lovable? What makes each heroine someone you'd like to know better?
4. What is the problem that causes tension between the two main characters and threatens to keep them from reaching a happy ending?
5. How does this problem affect both hero and heroine? Why can't one or both of them simply walk away?
6. What makes the love between these two characters special? Why is this relationship perfect for them, the best love story they could possibly have?
7. How does the author resolve the big issues that have been raised between the characters? Is the resolution surprising? Satisfying?



The Framework of Your Story

1. Who is your heroine? What makes her sympathetic? What will the readers like about her?
2. Who is your hero? What makes him someone the readers can fall in love with?
3. What is the initial problem that brings the hero and heroine together?
4. What forces them to stay in contact? Why can't one of them just walk away?
5. What do they see in each other? What features about each one attract the other?
6. What larger difficulty, character flaw, or past experience threatens to make it impossible for hero and heroine to be happy together forever?

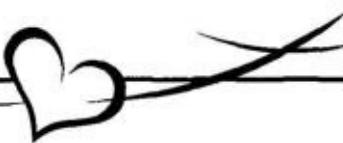
7. How do they solve those difficulties?

8. What is the happy ending? Does one of them make a sacrifice? Do they compromise?



chapter four

Hero and Heroine



Romantic heroes and heroines are a bit different from the sort of people we run into every day. Main characters have their flaws, but overall they're just a little nicer, brighter, quicker, and better than real people. They're allowed their petty moments, but in important matters they take the moral high ground.

Of course, standards vary by category and type of story. The hero of a mainstream stand-alone romance can get away with a great many things that the hero of a sweet traditional category romance wouldn't dream of doing. *But even the bad-boy hero will have good aspects to his character, and the readers won't have to dig too deeply to find them.* The chick-lit heroine may have some rough edges, but deep down she's not the sort to be cruel even to people who deserve it.

THE HEROINE

Though there are always two main characters in the romance novel, in most books the major focus is on the heroine—the story is primarily her story. Though the hero's *point of view and thoughts* are usually included, the heroine's point of view and thoughts usually take up a larger portion of the book.

To be both believable and sympathetic, the heroine should have a balance of good and bad characteristics, as all humans do. She should be pretty much like the people we run into every day in the office coffee room or at the supermarket.

Many new romance writers create heroines who are perfect. They're not only shaped like Barbie dolls, they're smart and witty and run multimillion-dollar businesses from their kitchen tables. They're gorgeous enough to be models, and they can wear white shorts to a picnic and never get a grass stain.

Or the new writer goes the other direction and creates a hapless and helpless heroine. This woman gets mixed up in one bad relationship after another and never questions why;

she'll believe any fool story she's told without ever stopping to consider the source, and she's wildly inconsistent in the ways she reacts to people and events. Because this woman doesn't respect herself, she commands no respect from others—including the readers.

Readers quickly become impatient with the too-stupid-to-live heroine who stumbles into one disaster after another and has to be rescued, or who gives every statement she hears the worst possible interpretation, causing herself endless embarrassment and trouble.

The heroine who walks into an obvious trap doesn't win sympathy from readers but something closer to disgust. The heroine who believes a story when it's apparent to the readers that the person telling it is a liar is not sympathetic but annoying. The heroine who creates her own problems is not as likely to earn the readers' empathy as one whose difficulties come at least partly from outside.

Convincingly Attractive Heroines

Physical attractiveness is one of the areas in which romance heroines are a little different from real women. (When romance heroines are desperately unhappy, they always stop eating and lose weight. Now, honestly, how many real women do you know who do that?) Though there have been stories and even whole romance categories featuring larger-size heroines, these stories have generally been less successful than others in the marketplace. A wonderful story will be successful no matter what dress size the heroine wears, but a same-old, same-old tale won't sell off the shelves solely because the heroine is big as well as beautiful.

More important than size, however, is the heroine's self-respect. She does not need to look like a model or be shaped like one, but readers will like her better if she takes care of her body and looks as good as she possibly can.

However, there is another aspect to attractiveness that goes well beyond good looks. The heroine must be convincingly attractive to the hero, and that means much more than having pretty hair, wide eyes, and a symmetrical body.

What is it about this woman that makes him want to spend the rest of his life with her? If she has a vicious temper, the most gorgeous figure can't make her truly attractive. Such a heroine is inadequate and dissatisfying, and the hero looks like a fool for not being able to see past the pretty face to the unpleasant personality underneath.

A Heroine With a Past

A satisfying, sympathetic heroine is a woman with a past. That doesn't necessarily mean she has dark, deep secrets (though indeed she may have). It doesn't mean she's been a stripper or is on the lam because she's facing criminal charges.

Having a past simply means that our heroine, like all human beings, has been shaped by her experiences, and her reactions to what has happened make her a person distinct from every other individual on the planet.

Was she raised in an orphanage? Or did she grow up with a stern and critical father? Or was she the much-pampered only girl in a family of five boys? Those three women will have entirely different feelings about families.

The heroine's past experiences affect everything she does and every decision she makes. But it isn't necessary for readers to know all of that history right away. In fact, one of the bigger mistakes made by most new romance writers is to pour all the information about the heroine's past into the first chapter. It's much better to wait until later in the book to share that information, when readers must know about the heroine's past in order to understand her.

Modern-Day Heroines

The heroine of today's contemporary romance novels (category and single title) is independent, self-supporting, and mature. She's often a career woman, though her job might be anything from nanny or waitress to president of a major corporation. If she's on the lower end of the economic spectrum, however, she doesn't intend to stay there and she has a plan for improving her job prospects.

She has problems—including some of her own making—but she is competent at running her life. She may have had a bad relationship, even a bad marriage, but she's grown from the experience and readers are confident the heroine won't repeat her mistake.

The chick-lit heroine is often a bit less mature and competent, more likely to hold an entry-level job, and more apt to have mucked up her life and created the problems she's facing. But even she is generally independent, not relying on others to rescue her or pay for her mistakes.

The heroine of contemporary romance may be looking for a love interest, but she doesn't *need* one. She can take care of herself, but finding the right man would be a bonus.

In her short contemporary *Dad by Choice*, Marie Ferrarella shows her very competent, very professional, very busy heroine not only as a good doctor, but also as a good daughter:

Dr. Abby Maitland was doing her best not to look as impatient as she felt.

Just down the hall in Maitland Maternity Clinic, patients sat in her waiting room on tasteful, blue-cushioned chairs, chosen to afford optimum comfort to women who were for the most part in an uncomfortable condition. She was booked solid without so much as a ten-minute window of breathing space. She'd come into the clinic running slightly behind and praying that no one would see fit to go into labor this morning.

That was when her mother had waylaid her.

Abby had always had difficulty saying no to her mother, not out of a sense of obligation but one of pure affection. It was hard to say no to a woman who had gone out of her way all her life to make sure that her children were happy and well cared for. Today was no different.

By showing Abby in both her roles, Ferrarella shows us a woman we immediately like. She's smart, busy, thoughtful, loving, but not perfect—she's running late and having just a little trouble holding on to her self-control.

Historical Heroines

The heroines of today's historical romance novels aren't all that much different from the heroines of books set in the present day. The historical heroine may battle additional constraints—fewer opportunities for women, tighter rules for acceptable behavior, less independence in decision-making—but she often sets out to get around those limits, and she generally succeeds.

In an era in which women did not have careers, the historical heroine nevertheless will find a way to make her mark on the world. She may run her father's estate, raise and study plants, or teach the servants to read, but she won't just sit on a sofa; she'll do something worthwhile with her time. The heroine may have few options to earn a living wage, but she'll be as self-supporting and independent as she possibly can. She may be younger than the average contemporary heroine, but she'll be mature for her age—looking beyond short-term goals and thinking of what's best for others.

If she's had a bad marriage, it ended with the death of her husband. Like her contemporary sister, she's willing to live independently for the rest of her life, though the realities of society may force her to consider a marriage of convenience. And even if she's required by society to marry for something other than love, she'll find a way to turn that marriage to her advantage.

In her single-title historical *Something About Emmaline*, Elizabeth Boyle introduces a heroine who's quite able to defend herself from an intruder—if she wants to:

It had been a very busy afternoon at the house on Hanover Square and Lady Sedgwick had sought her bed early. ... The door of her bedchamber burst open. It rattled on the hinges and banged into the wall with a furious slam.

Emmaline sat bolt upright and stared at the caped stranger marauding into her sanctuary as if he had every right.

So she did what any lady of the ton would do when her honor was in peril. She pulled a small pistol from under her pillow and pointed it with dead-eyed aim at the intruder.

So perhaps she hadn't gotten this lady of the manor part down completely, but it was what *she* would do.

“Stay where you are, sirrah, or it will be the last thing you do.”

He ignored her warning completely, coming closer. The candle he held aloft cast a circle of light around them both. His gaze fell first on her face, then ... fell to the pistol in her hand and one regal brow rose. “Put that away!”

“I will not,” she said, her hand shaking. ... She could ... see that he was devilishly handsome and well dressed. ... She'd always had a weakness for impossibly handsome men, especially dark-haired ones. ... She took one last regretful look at the magnificent man before her. ...

It was at that moment that Emmaline Denford, Lady Sedgwick, realized she was about to shoot her husband.

The very notion startled her so much, she dropped the pistol. And then the damned thing

fired for her.

Emmaline is hardly a typical woman of her time (1801), but she's a typical historical heroine—able and willing to protect herself and not at all above noticing a handsome man.



1. What qualities does your ideal heroine possess?
2. What qualities would make you want to be friends with her?
3. What qualities in a heroine turn you off?
4. What careers or jobs would be off-limits for a likeable and sympathetic heroine?

THE HERO

In most romance novels, the hero is the second most important character—but he's also the pivot around which the story revolves. Because he's central to the entire story, it's very important that he be a fascinating character—someone the readers want to learn more about, someone they can fall in love with.

Today's romance hero is more verbal, tender, and vulnerable than the romantic hero often or twenty years ago. While the strong and silent type still exists, this modern man can show flaws, ask for emotional support, and have a sense of humor.

It is possible, however, to make your hero so sensitive, so vulnerable, or so wounded by life that he appears to be a wimp. When a female author, writing about the kind of man she thinks she'd love, gives him habits and characteristics that are more commonly found in women, the hero may end up acting more like a girlfriend than a hero—readers may find him unconvincing as a man and vaguely dissatisfying as an object of affection.

Nor should you go too far in the other direction and make him look like the sort of man who wouldn't hesitate to abuse a woman to get his own way. Forcing kisses or other intimacies is controlling—not romantic—behavior.

It's also frighteningly easy to make your hero look like a fool. If, for instance, he's divorced from a simply horrible woman, readers are going to wonder—with good reason why he was stupid enough to marry her in the first place.

Convincingly Attractive Heroes

The hero has to be convincingly attractive to both the heroine and the readers. It's fine for him to be a bad-boy type if he displays positive qualities that balance out his naughty tendencies. A true hero needs to be exciting, sexy, and more than a little dangerous, but he must also have a solidity that assures our heroine she can trust and lean on him.

Good looks are a plus, but he has to be more than rich and good-looking to be worth the heroine's time. A drop-dead handsome face is less important than how he treats the people around him. If the hero yells and hits walls and throws things, but the heroine is charmed despite his behavior because he resembles a Greek god and has abs like a washboard, she looks like a fool.

What does the heroine see in him to make her fall in love and want to spend her life with this man? What makes him good husband material?

Alpha and Beta Heroes

The alpha hero is powerful, driven, assertive, masterful, dominant, superior, successful, and charming. The beta hero is playful, relaxed, nurturing, and caring, but no less successful and no less charming. Alpha is likely to run a corporation and be trying to acquire a few more. If Beta owns the corporation, he's apt to let someone else run it day-to-day while he coaches a kids' soccer team.

Both are equally welcome in today's romance fiction, though some categories are a more natural fit for one or the other.

Books published by Harlequin Presents, a short contemporary category, nearly always feature an alpha hero—a rich, powerful, and domineering tycoon like Lucy Monroe's hero from *The Greek's Innocent Virgin*.

Sebastian watched Rachel disappear through the door to the kitchen, frustration knotting his insides.

Could he have handled that any worse?

He had made her coming to his bed sound like a meaningless encounter between two people intent on scratching a sexual itch. It was nothing like that. He did not love her, could not marry her, but he desired her with a multilayered intensity he'd never known with another woman. ...

When she came back in with the dessert, she gave him no opportunity to rectify his error. ...

His hand snaked out and grabbed her. "You're supposed to cuddle next to me, remember? ... It is part of the special night you planned for me. ..." He pulled her onto

the sofa with him, before pushing the volume button on the remote control. Old movie music filled the room as he tugged her into a reclining position beside him. He couldn't help himself, but he wondered why she didn't fight it. She wasn't happy with him. ...

She gasped as they made body contact and he settled one arm around her waist. He looked down to find her eyes wide and her bow lips parted in surprise.

"This is called cuddling." He curled her against him as close as they could get with their clothes on.

At the feel of her warm soft body, he forgot his intention to force a confrontation and simply took what was on offer.

Sebastian is a purely alpha character—determined to get what he wants even if his wishes don't quite coincide with those of the lady in his life, and quite capable of charming her into changing her mind.

In contrast, Harlequin American Romance, another short contemporary category, is more open to beta heroes—nurturers and protectors, like firefighters or law enforcement

personnel, or hotel managers like Kristin Hardy's Gabriel in *Under the Mistletoe*.

"You're kidding." Gabriel Trask stared at Mona Landry, his head of housekeeping. "No water in the entire laundry room?" ... If he cursed a blue streak in his head, it was nobody's business but his own. ... "Mona, how's our linen supply look?"

"Enough for today and maybe half of the rooms tomorrow. After that ..." She shrugged. "I keep telling you we need more."

New linens, new plumbing, new pillars to replace the rotting ones on the west porch, new carpeting in the ballroom.

Old budget. When his coal-dark hair eventually turned gray, he'd know where to place the blame. Gabe suppressed a sigh. "All right, we go to the laundry in Montpe-lier. ... Find a bellhop but get on it now. We need the laundry to turn the job around by the end of the day." Pulling from the bell staff would leave them short up front during checkout, but they'd manage.

If necessary, he'd drive the damn truck himself.

This beta hero runs a business, and he's a problem-solver, but he's an entirely different personality from the alpha example we looked at. What Gabe worries about is on an entirely different plane—water pipes, bed linens, rotting pillars, and who's going to drive the truck. It's hard to imagine him kissing a woman unless she was in the mood to cooperate—though he can be just as talented as his alpha counterpart at charming her into changing her mind.

Often the most attractive heroes display a combination of alpha and beta characteristics. A go-getter who's out to change the world between nine and five, he then goes home and plays with the kids, helps them with their homework, and tucks them in with a bedtime story. Now *that's* a hero.

Your Hero's Motivations

When the conflict in your story pits the hero against the heroine, your hero must have a reason for what he does, whether you choose to go with an alpha or a beta. He doesn't stand in the way of the heroine getting what she wants or needs just to be nasty. He always has a good reason for trying to prevent her from succeeding in her quest. A hero who interferes in the heroine's life without adequate, believable cause isn't behaving like a hero. He looks instead like a control freak or a potential stalker—possessive and perhaps even malicious.

The hero's reasons must be explained somewhere in the story, although often they aren't revealed until near the end of the book. However, even if the hero isn't talking about why he feels as he does, his motivation will affect all of his actions throughout the story.

A Hero With a Past

Though men are less likely than women to contemplate their experiences in an effort to extract a lesson, they're going to react to current situations based on what has happened to them in the past. The hero's past experiences—even things that happened to him in

childhood—will affect everything he does and shape the sort of man he is.

The fact that men are less prone than women to ponder their pasts can come in handy in the romance novel. A hero who is unwilling to commit himself to a relationship may not realize that his hesitation stems from his belief that a woman drove his father to suicide. He's more likely to think that every other man is just as reluctant as he is to settle down with one woman, and it may not be until he loses the woman of his dreams—the heroine—that he's willing to consider the source of his feelings and change his attitude.

Rich Enough?

The romance novels of a dozen years ago usually involved an immensely wealthy, upper-class hero. That fantasy is still found in many of today's romances, especially those in which alpha heroes appear, but across the range of romance novels, wealth is less prominent than before. There's nothing particularly romantic about poverty, and the readers want to know that the couple will be content with their standard of living and not suffer from a lack of basic creature comforts. But far more significant than wealth is the character's lifestyle and his level of satisfaction with his circumstances.

Part of the fascination of a hero is his devotion to the work he does, whatever that work is. A character who is satisfied with a menial job is less appealing to readers than one who wants to achieve in his field.

The hero of a romance novel is nearly always the boss. If he doesn't own the whole business (and he likely does), then he's an equal partner, or he runs his department with very little direction from superiors. He'll be the bank president, not the loan officer or the teller. Or, he's figured out a way to be independent within an organization—he might be a consultant rather than an employee. If he's holding a lower-level job, he's got a reason—he's not there because it's the only job he could get.

Though the majority of romance heroes are businessmen (often tycoons or entrepreneurs on a grand scale), there are many lawyers, doctors, architects, and other white-collar professionals. A growing number of heroes are engaged in the dangerous professions of firefighting, law enforcement, and military service. Some are craftsmen (builders, plumbers, or carpenters, either by profession or as a hobby). Much less often, a hero is an artist—a painter, writer, musician, or dancer.

Some jobs are perceived as dull, which is why heroes are less likely to be accountants, and some jobs are viewed as too powerless to be appealing to a hero, which is why few heroes are clerks in retail stores. But there are few jobs a romance hero could probably never hold—funeral director and proctologist are two that come to mind.

Historical Heroes

Heroes of historical romances are perhaps the most unreal of all characters in romance novels. Throughout the ages there have been men who regarded women as capable equals, but they've been the exception. Society's rules through history have encouraged men to think of themselves as boss, head of the household and family, and final authority on every question. Adultery was commonplace and sometimes even encouraged.

Sometimes the hero of a historical romance starts out acting chauvinistic, learning and changing through the heroine's influence as the story progresses, but he must be more open-minded than most real men of his era or he wouldn't be able to make the transition. The hero of a historical is willing—at least by the end of the story—to treat the lady he loves as a full partner rather than as a possession. And if he had a mistress when he met the heroine, he neither has nor wants one at the end of the story.

The historical hero is also the least likely of all characters in romance fiction to have a real job. Until the last century or so, the gathering and managing of real estate was the most highly regarded profession in Western civilization. Landowners were respected far more than doctors and attorneys, and immeasurably more than those who dealt in trade. The hero of a historical novel is often immensely wealthy because of the property he owns; if he's earned his money rather than inheriting it, he's not likely to boast of the sources of his revenue.

The historical hero will spend his time much differently than the hero of a contemporary romance. Gambling was a legitimate pastime for the gentleman who could afford it, as in Jane Feather's historical single title *Almost a Bride*.

The slither of the cards across the baize table, the chink of rouleaux as the players placed their bets, the soft murmur of the groom porters pronouncing the odds were the only sounds in the inner chamber of Brooke's gaming club. Six men sat around the faro table, five playing against the banker. They wore leather bands to protect the laced ruffles of their shirts and leather eyeshades to shield their eyes from the brilliance of the chandeliers, whose many candles cast a dazzling glare upon the baize table. The banker's face was expressionless as he dealt the cards, watched the bets being laid, paid out, or collected at the completion of each turn. To the spectators gathered around the chamber it seemed as if winning or losing was a matter of complete indifference to Jack Fortescu, Duke of St. Jules.

The Duke of St. Jules had always played deep. He had lost one fortune at the tables in his green youth, disappeared abroad to recoup, and returned several years later in possession of a second and even larger fortune. This one he had not lost, simply increased with steady and skillful play. Rarely if ever did he allow himself to rise from the tables a loser at the end of an evening.

Even a bad-boy contemporary hero probably wouldn't consider gambling as a profession, or find his personal mission in it as the Duke of St. Jules does.



1. What qualities does your ideal hero possess?
2. What qualities would make you fall in love with a hero? Stay in love with him?
3. Are there career choices or activities you would find most attractive in a hero?
4. What one thing do you think even the most handsome and charming hero *can't* do, if he's to win his lady's heart?

CREATING THE HEROIC COUPLE

To be real, your characters have to be imperfect. They must have problems or no one will be interested in reading about them. But while heroes and heroines have almost certainly created some of their own problems, they can't have done so out of stupidity or shortsightedness, or readers will have trouble empathizing. There is usually a good motive—sometimes even a noble one—for the actions that lead them into trouble. If, for example, the heroine's credit cards are maxed, it's probably not because she has a closet full of clothes and shoes. She might, on the other hand, have been buying clothes and shoes for the occupants of a homeless shelter.

If the hero's about to declare bankruptcy, it's not because he's been buying yachts and diamonds—but he might have been pouring money into a faltering business so his employees could continue to draw a paycheck.

The problems the characters face are important to them—life changing, in fact—but they must also be important to the readers. A story about whether Susie can get Joe to improve his table manners isn't likely to keep the readers on the edge of their seats.

Main characters should grow and change during the course of a story. Since they are facing life-altering problems and situations, it makes sense that these difficulties will change their perspectives, attitudes, and outlooks on life. The too-perfect character has no room to grow and mature as he deals with problems. But even in their imperfection, main characters have to remain likeable, even admirable, in order to be worthy of a story.

Kind and Gentle Characters

Heroes and heroines are unfailingly kind to those who are less powerful than they are. They are gentle; even if Aunt Agnes talks incessantly about her health, they don't snap at her or treat her like a nuisance. Heroes and heroines don't kick the dog, no matter how angry they are. And every last one of them has an honorary degree in how to get along with a kid while raising him to be a genius.

Heroes and heroines don't gossip, and they don't generally take delight in the troubles of others, even when it's the Other Woman and she deserves it.

They're only rude to each other, and even then, they're not hateful or vicious. Wisecracks and smart remarks are acceptable; cruel taunts are another thing entirely.

Heroes and heroines don't lie, but they are allowed to be tightfisted with the truth. The hero, in particular, can be deliberately misleading if his motive in not telling all the facts is to protect the heroine.

The heroine can be equally careful with her level of frankness, sometimes telling the literal truth but implying something entirely different, as Sara does in Miranda Jarrett's historical novella *A Gift Most Rare*:

"I trust you would confide in me if something were truly wrong, my dear, wouldn't you?" asked Lady Fordyce gently. ... "You would tell me if there was a matter I could remedy?"

Oh, yes, thought Sara unhappily, of *course* she'd confide in Lady Fordyce. Governesses for young ladies were supposed to possess unblemished and virginal reputations. She'd never told the Fordyces that she'd spent most of her life in India, or that she'd been forced to leave in a rush of disgrace, let alone spoken of her unfortunate entanglement with Lord Revell Claremont. How could she, when any part of her sorry tale could cost her her place—a place she couldn't afford to lose—even with a kind-hearted mistress like Lady Fordyce?

"If there were any ills you could remedy, my lady," she said with careful truth, "than I should always come to you."

Sara doesn't lie—she just allows her employer to believe that she's denied there's any trouble.

Partners and Relationships

Heroes and heroines don't commit adultery. While they may have divorced, they do not enter into a new love relationship while still bound by a legal or moral commitment to a previous partner. This restriction is largely a matter of common sense. If a person has so little respect for a spouse that he has an affair—whether it's physical or emotional—with someone new, then it's difficult to believe that he would be any more faithful to the new love.

To a lesser degree, the same rule applies to other emotional commitments. A hero who is engaged is most likeable if the engagement is broken off as soon as he recognizes the attraction to the new partner.

Whether the previous relationship was ended by a divorce, a broken engagement, a jilting, or a partner's death, the character does not enter a new relationship until there has been adequate time to heal. Rebound relationships often don't last in real life, and they're not convincing in fiction.

The length of time needed to recover will depend on the nature of the relationship. It will take much longer to grieve the death of a beloved spouse than it will to get over a steady date who suddenly decided he wanted to see other women.

Balancing the Heroine and Hero

Main characters who are similar in style, in the amount of power they have over their situation, and in their degree of outspokenness create a nice balance in the structure of the romance. That doesn't mean they should act the same, or that they must be absolutely equal in every way—just that they should both have areas and times where one is stronger than the other.

If the hero has the heroine completely under his thumb, if she's helpless to act or to put him in his place, then he may look more sadistic than heroic. Pairing a heroine who's an in-your-face screamer with a hero who's the silent type may make the heroine look verbally abusive. A hero who makes patronizing remarks about a heroine who simply absorbs the insults is annoying, but if she talks back to him in the same sort of way, they're in proportion. (They may both be annoying in that case, but at least the readers can

be equally annoyed by each.)

If one of your characters has a great deal of power over the other, look for ways to even things up. The romance is far more satisfying when the power between the characters is like a teeter-totter—sometimes she's on the high end,

sometimes he is, but readers don't know from minute to minute who's going to have the upper hand.

In my sweet traditional romance *Maybe Married*, the hero wants the heroine, his ex-wife, to pretend for three months that their divorce hasn't actually gone through so he can pull off a business deal:

He picked up his coffee mug. “So tell me what you want in return for three months of your life.”

Dana drew her knees up and folded her arms around them. She looked across the street instead of at him, and said, “A conference center.”

Zeke spit his coffee all the way to the sidewalk. “You want what? You have to be talking a couple of million dollars. Five, maybe.”

“Actually, a nice round ten would be better.”

“Dana, darling, I know I said something last night about a payoff, but you are talking serious money.”

“I know,” Dana said serenely. “You can afford it—or at least you will be able to ... your business is worth hundreds of millions.”

In the first version I wrote of this scene, Zeke stated his demands and Dana, though she wasn't happy about it, simply conceded; he moved in and they took up their charade. But the scene didn't work—the hero appeared to be a selfish jerk and the heroine a wimp. In the revision, encouraging Dana to be true to her personality balanced the power struggle. Now that the characters each have a big stake in their bargain, and a hammer to hold over each other, the entire scenario is more enticing.

IN REVIEW: Studying the Heroic Couple



1. Think about the main characters in books you've recently read. In what ways were they heroic, in the sense of being larger than life? In what ways were they imperfect?
2. Were the characters realistic? Sympathetic?
3. How did the characters grow and change during the course of the story?
4. Which heroes were alpha types, and which were beta types? Did any fit some other profile?
5. Would you like to be friends with these characters?
6. How do the heroes and heroines vary in different kinds of books?
7. What are some things the hero or heroine of a single-title book could do that a

category romance character couldn't?

8. What character traits or habits draw you to a person? What traits and habits do you want your main characters to exhibit?

9. What character traits or habits make you not want to know a person better? What traits and habits do you want to avoid when you create your heroic couple?

10. How can you maintain a balance between your characters so neither overwhelms the other? How will they talk to each other? How will they treat each other?

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR MAIN CHARACTERS

Now that you're familiar with the various heroines and heroes who appear in successful romance novels, take a closer look at how to develop your characters and make them come to life for your readers.

What makes these characters live on long after readers have finished their stories? The more realistic they are, the more believable—and the more memorable. So you must endow your hero and heroine with real attributes and—even more important—real motives.

What does your heroine want or need badly enough that she would put herself at risk in order to get it? What makes this character tick? What is her motivation?

People don't take actions without cause. They aren't nasty just for the sake of being nasty. With rare exceptions, even a person's most misguided actions result from a deep belief that she is doing the right thing, the best thing under the circumstances. Every character, then, has to have good reason for her actions, so the most important question you can ask about the character you're creating is *why*. But if you begin with that question, you're almost certain to come up with a stereotypical and predictable answer.

Start building your character from the basics—but keep asking why. Question even the smallest of details, like the origin of a name. For instance, is your heroine named after an aunt? Did her quirky mother make it up? How has carrying that name affected her life? Where does your character live? In a condo? A mobile home? Does she live alone? Why did she choose that location and living arrangement? (Or was her home chosen for her, as it often is with historical heroines?)

Ask about her education and her job. What attracted her to that career? How does she feel about her work? (Even a heroine who doesn't hold an actual job—the heroine of a historical novel, for instance—will have some sort of occupation.) What does she want to be doing in twenty years?

Think about how your character relates to others. How does she feel about the opposite sex, and why? What experiences have made her feel that way? If your heroine has sworn never to marry, what made her decide that? What factors in her life make her want a big family—or not want a family at all?

Who is her best friend, and why? Who is her worst enemy, and why? (And please don't say herself. We are all our own worst enemies, but that doesn't lead us far in story

development.) What does she like most about her life, and why? What does she dislike most about her life, and why?

And then go on to more important questions that further probe your character's mindset and past: What does she want to keep secret from the world? What would she die to defend?

And possibly the most important of these questions: What single event in her life has made your heroine who she is today? What opportunity, success, trauma, or loss was the turning point in your character's life?

All of these are *why* questions, and each can lead you down new paths in finding out what this person is all about. Answers to the latter questions may send you back to change or expand answers to the earlier ones.

Once you've completed the heroine, repeat this questioning process with your hero. Many writers create a tailored list of questions in a worksheet they can print and fill out for each significant character in a new story.

As you get a clearer picture of your two main characters, start asking yourself what makes the two of them perfect for each other. What gaps or weaknesses does one have that the other can balance? Equally important, what makes them seem to be the worst possible combination for each other? What is there about him that's going to drive her up the nearest wall, and vice versa?

You may be wondering if it's really necessary to go to these lengths. Not every one of these questions will reveal critical information about each hero or heroine. Some will be more important than others. It's difficult to tell ahead of time, however, which ones are crucial—and asking them all gives you every opportunity to learn the hidden facets of the characters you're creating.

Often the real advantage of asking and answering these questions is simply to make the characters more real to the author. That's a sense that carries over to the readers almost automatically, even if the information from the answers is never revealed in the story. Exploring your main characters fully will help you establish their heroic qualities, problems, and conflicts, and will help you develop satisfying outcomes.

Creating Your Heroic Couple



Answer the following questions about your main characters. It's usually most productive to address one character at a time, but if you run into difficulty answering the questions about one, try switching over to the other main character for a while.

As you're answering the questions, look for points of agreement and disagreement between the characters. If he's from a big family and she's from a small one, how might that create problems for them in developing a relationship?

- What is this person's name?
- Why was he named that?

- Age?

- Birthday?
- What astrological sign was he born under? Does it matter to him?
- Where does he live? (Urban? Small town? Rural?)
- Why did he choose to live there? Was this geographical location his choice or someone else's?
- Does he live in an apartment? A house? What type or style? Did he choose the residence, and why?
- Does he live by himself? With others?
- What kind of vehicle does he drive?
- What are his important material possessions?
- Give a brief physical description.
- What are his hobbies?
- What kind of music does he enjoy?
- Does he have pets? If not, why not? Would he like to have pets?
- What are his favorite foods and drinks?
- If he has an unexpected free half-day, how does he spend it?
- How would a friend describe him?
- What is his education?
- What is his job? (For historical heroes and heroines, describe their place in family life or society. How do they occupy themselves?)
- Is this a long-term career or just a job?
- Why did he choose that type of work?
- How does he feel about his work?
- What does he want to be doing in twenty years?
- How does he feel about the opposite sex?
- Why does he feel that way?
- Is he married? Single? Divorced?
- Does he have children?
- Does he have former lovers?
- How would a former date or lover describe him?
- Who are his parents?

- Does he have brothers and sisters?
- Where was he born and raised?
- How important is the family relationship to him?
- Who is his best friend? Why?
- Who is his worst enemy? Why?
- Which one event in his life has made this person what he is today?
- How does that turning point in the character's life relate to the other main character in the story?
- How does he feel about himself?
- What trait does he want to keep secret from the world?
- What does he like most about his life?
- What does he dislike most about his life?
- What one thing would he like to change about the world?
- What would this person die to defend?
- What is his most likeable character trait?
- What is his most unlikeable or troublesome character defect?
- As the story begins, what is his problem?
- What does he do that makes this problem worse?
- Who is this person's love interest?
- What qualities in the other main character are most attractive to this person?
- What is this person's ideal happy ending?
- What reaction do you want the readers to have to this person?
- Why should the readers care about this person?

Did your discoveries about your characters surprise you? Do you feel more prepared to write about these people? Do you have more insight into how they might act or how they'll behave under stress or pressure?

You may feel tempted, now that you have all this information, to find places to plug it into the story. But just because you know something about a character doesn't mean your readers need to know it. What your heroine does on an unexpected afternoon off might have relevance to the plot, but usually it doesn't. Select those facts that best illustrate the person—the ones that have a strong impact upon the story—to share with the readers, and leave the rest out.

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chapter five

Conflict



Because your book is a romance novel, readers will know from the moment they pick it up that the hero and heroine will get together at the end—simply watching them get acquainted and fall in love isn’t intriguing enough to keep them reading. What will make your readers turn pages is the difficulty this couple faces in getting together. It’s the conflict between them, threatening to keep them from reaching the happy ending you’ve promised, that keeps the readers interested.

Simply giving your characters a problem doesn’t automatically create conflict. Only when the problem involves both of them and creates tension between them do you have conflict.

Perhaps the problem that brings your hero and heroine together is a project they’re both assigned to. But if they’re getting along great, splitting the work evenly, and each one is complimenting the other’s achievement, that’s not very interesting. They have a problem, all right—a big project to finish—but no conflict.

However, if each is convinced that he or she has the one right approach that will make the project successful, or each thinks the other is trying to avoid the hardest part of the work, or if the person who gets credit for the results will also win a big promotion that both of them want, then you have a situation that causes tension and keeps the readers turning pages to find out what happens.

If your divorced spouses have remained good friends through the years, their child’s wedding probably isn’t going to make a very exciting story. But if they haven’t spoken to each other since the decree, and one of them is coming to the wedding with a new significant other—or if one of them is in favor of the wedding and the other opposed—then there are likely to be fireworks surrounding the nuptials.

WHAT CONFLICT IS—AND ISN’T

Conflict is the difficulty between the hero and heroine that threatens to keep them from getting together. What causes the hero and heroine to be at odds with each other? What prevents them from being too comfortable? What do they disagree about? What do the hero and heroine have at stake? Why is this difficulty so important to each of them? Why

is it important to the readers? Conflict is not:

- **Fighting, arguing, or disagreeing.** Sometimes conflict is expressed in heated discussions or shouting matches, but two people can be locked in conflict without ever raising their voices, and they can also bicker incessantly without ever addressing an important issue.
- **A delay.** An event that simply delays a hero's or heroine's progress toward a goal is only an incident. If another character sidetracks the heroine to talk about an unrelated problem, and this discussion keeps her from confronting the hero, that's not conflict.
- **Failure to communicate.** Misunderstanding each other, making wrong assumptions, jumping to conclusions, or wrongly judging one another are not illustrations of conflict, but of the hero and heroine's inability to make themselves clear.
- **The trouble-causing interference of another person.** If the meddling of another person causes problems, the main characters can appear too passive to take charge of their own lives or stand up for themselves.
- **A main character's unwillingness to admit that the other person is attractive.** Though romance characters attempt to fight off their attraction, conflict lies in the underlying reasons why it seems inappropriate or unwise to fall in love with this person.

DETERMINING CHARACTER PROBLEMS

What kind of problems your characters should face depends on a number of factors, including what sort of people they are. Not everybody will be bothered by the same events or issues. A difficulty one person would shrug off might paralyze someone else. The difficulty faced by your characters is particularly important and involving to them because of their past experiences or their personalities.

The severity and intensity of the problems you give your characters also depends on the size of the book you're writing. The longer the story—the more pages you need to fill—the bigger the problem you need to create for your characters. A story involving the hunt for a serial killer will take more space

and time than one in which the hero and heroine are figuring out who vandalized the local school.

Whatever the problem is, it must strike readers as important. A problem that makes the readers roll their eyes and say "Get over it" isn't likely to drive an emotionally compelling story.

The central difficulty your characters face must be one that can grow more complex and involved as the book continues. If all they do through the whole story is talk about the problem introduced in chapter one, the ending—when they finally settle on an answer that should have been apparent from the beginning—will be unsatisfying. If the supposed conflict arises because the characters misunderstand each other and they don't find out until the last chapter that there's no real problem after all, the story will bog down.

SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM PROBLEMS

In order to make conflict even more compelling, you need two problems— not just one.

First, you need an initial situation that brings the couple together and keeps them together so they can get to know each other. This problem is known as the short-term problem, or the external conflict. It might be a job or a family situation—a difficulty outside themselves that they have to resolve.

But you also need a deeper difficulty for each character. This deeper problem—called the long-term problem, or the internal conflict—is likely to be a past experience or a character flaw that makes it seem impossible for these two people to ever find happiness together.

The Short-Term Problem

The short-term problem is the difficulty or event that puts the couple in contact and causes their initial disagreements. It's often called the external conflict because it is usually caused by something or someone outside of the characters' control.

Since the action of the story doesn't really get started until the hero and heroine are both present and the conflict is under way, this initial problem appears early in the book—often starting in the first few pages. At the latest, the rough outlines of the short-term problem are in place by the end of the first chapter.

The short-term problem is often the event described in the back cover blurb. It is usually connected to the hook, the attention-getter that will cause readers to pick up the book.

You can also think of the short-term problem as the difficulty or obstacle that makes the main characters interesting enough to be the subject of a story. What change does the heroine face that threatens her way of life, that will change her forever? What challenge must she confront? This difficulty is the character's short-term problem—the change, challenge, or threat she faces at or near the start of the story.

The heroine's short-term problem is not simply the entrance of the hero into her life. He may appear because of the change or threat the short-term problem represents, but simply meeting him is not the problem.

Each of the main characters will have a short-term problem—though sometimes there's just one short-term problem that affects both the hero and heroine:

- They're assigned to work on a project together.
- They're a divorced couple whose grown child is getting married and who insists they sit together at the wedding.
- He's just bought her family's ancestral estate.
- There's only one apartment available and they both need a place to live.

If the short-term problem isn't actually shared, then the two individual troubles will be closely related. Perhaps they can help each other to solve their difficulties:

- He needs a house and she's a real estate agent desperate for a commission.
 - She's trying to establish a new business; he needs special services from that business.
 - She's inherited a business but can't run it herself; he has the expertise to run it but not the money to buy it.
 - He needs a fiance to help him close a business deal, and she needs money to finish school.

The more solid and down-to-earth the short-term problem is, the easier it will be to construct a plot. Though the character can have more than one problem going on at a time, it's most useful for story development if the short-term problem is confined to one clearly stated problem per character—either a single problem (that involves them both or two related problems).

New writers often come up with very amorphous initial conflicts, such as:

- Neither of the characters wants to take the chance of trusting again.
- He has to make her accept a truth she doesn't want to face.
- They've each been deceived in the past and won't tolerate being lied to again.

While those concepts can be developed into interesting problems, they're hard to grasp, hard to illustrate, and hard to write about.

And they're actually long-term problems—character flaws or painful past experiences—rather than short-term ones. Lack of trust, unwillingness to commit, and bad past relationships often play a big part in the characters' eventual development and growth, but they're hard to get a grip on when they're set up as the initial problem.

If the characters' mutual problem is lack of trust, what do they talk about throughout the story? If they could actually discuss their difficulty in trusting, they'd be two-thirds of the way to solving the problem—but they can't trust each other enough to talk about it. Worse, without a certain amount of trust, there's not much else to talk about—and characters who have nothing to talk about are very hard to write about.

If, on the other hand, your two characters are at odds about who gets custody of the kid, or how to handle the business they've inherited, or what they're going to do about their marriage of convenience after it's not convenient to be married anymore, then they have lots of stuff that they must talk about—and they have many opportunities to test, explore, and discover that the other is a person who can be trusted after all.

Remember that a short-term problem is not a single event, so it can't be solved in a single step. "While rock climbing, Julie falls off a cliff" isn't a true short-term problem; she'll either be rescued or she'll die, and in either case the story is over.

The real short-term problem is what got her onto the cliff in the first place. Is she trying to protect the precious papers she's carrying from the bad guy who's pursuing her? Is she learning to climb because the man she thinks she loves insists he won't marry her unless she shares his hobby of rock climbing? In either of these cases (or a hundred others), when

she's rescued she still faces the problem that got her onto the cliff, plus she has the complications of a broken leg and a black eye and the hero—who rescued her—hanging around.

Some additional examples of complex short-term problems include:

- A hero who is offered a job in a different city, but a heroine who doesn't want to leave her challenging career to follow him.
- A heroine who wants to have a baby, but a hero who thinks he'd be a terrible dad.
- A heroine and hero who must work together despite a painful past relationship.

The key to all of these problems is that they create conflict and tension between the two characters, and they all offer potential for increasing complexity and involvement.

If your short-term problem isn't the sort that grows more complicated, you may be tempted to toss in unrelated obstacles in an attempt to create extra trouble for the characters. Your heroine might fall out of a tree, get hit by a car, and encounter a rattlesnake all in the first three chapters. But adding obstacles is not the same as developing a conflict, because one obstacle doesn't lead into or cause the next; they're just random happenings. Unless each event contributes to the advancement of the story and relates to all the other events in a meaningful sequence, the story is contrived.

Another type of weak short-term problem is one in which there simply aren't enough honest differences of opinion or conflicting goals to keep the readers

interested. Misunderstandings that can be solved with a few minutes of honest conversation fall into this category.

In Beth Cornelison's long contemporary *In Protective Custody*, her hero, Max, is faced with his short-term problem when his injured sister asks him to hide her infant son from the grandparents who are trying to kidnap him.

Gasping her beliefs one key word at a time, she argued breathlessly that if the Rialtos got the baby when he was released from the hospital, they'd take him out of the country and fight her custody rights. Her impassioned pleas for her child, even as she fought for her own life, wrenched Max's emotions in knots.

"You're only ... one I ... trust. Don't. ... let baby ... outta ... your sight. ..." Max placed his free hand over her lips. "Easy. Hush now. ... I won't let Joe's family get near your son. I promise."

... Relief softened the tension in her face. "You'll take m'baby? Hide?" ... What else could he do? The Rialtos didn't negotiate.

This short-term conflict is important, it's emotional, and it has very high stakes. Add to it that Max knows nothing about babies, and you have a built-in role for the heroine—who happens to work in a day care center and can't stand to see a child in danger of being mistreated or neglected.

The Long-Term Problem

The long-term problem is something about the characters' personalities or pasts that makes it seem impossible for them to reach a happy ending together. It's often called the internal conflict because it's usually something inside the character—a character flaw or a reaction to a past experience—that makes it difficult for her to make a lifelong commitment to the other.

Here's where lack of trust and reluctance to face unpleasant truths belong. With long-term conflicts as well as short-term ones, however, the more concrete the problem, the easier it will be to write the book. Rather than just saying that your character's problem is an inability to trust, look for the reason she can't trust.

A guy who's been jilted will have trust issues. So will one who was abandoned as a child. But the effects of those two situations will be different, so the actions and attitudes of those two men will be different even though they share a basic problem. The long-term problem may be something that makes the character reluctant to fall in love at all:

- She caught her previous fiance in bed with another woman.
- His parents experienced a bitter divorce and he doesn't want to risk having it happen to him.
- Everyone she's ever loved has died and she's afraid to try again.

Or it may be something that makes the character reluctant to fall in love with this particular individual:

- She's terrified of heights, and he's a mountain-climbing instructor.
- She grew up in poverty because her father was a compulsive gambler, and the hero makes his living running a casino.
- He rejected her once before, so she's afraid he'll do it again.

Often the long-term problems aren't shared with the readers until fairly late in the story. Frequently that's because the character herself doesn't recognize her character flaw until the pain of the current situation forces her to reassess the choices she's made in the past and the impact those choices continue to have on her life.

The readers may know right away that the heroine has been widowed but not find out until the last chapter that she's reluctant to love again, not because she adored her late husband, but because he was unfaithful to her.

Even if the details aren't shared with the readers up front, however, the long-term problem will affect all of that character's actions. The hero may not talk about his parents' tragic marriage, but his experience will affect how he acts toward the heroine.

Sometimes, in developing long-term problems for your characters, it's useful to ask, "Why are these people wrong for each other? Why is he the worst possible guy for her to fall in love with? Why is she the absolutely wrong woman for him?"

If the heroine's ex-husband was a crooked cop, then the worst possible person for her to fall in love with is probably another cop. If the hero's parents tried to control his life, then

the worst possible person for him to fall in love with may be a woman whose family members are always minding each other's business.

Of course, in the long run these people aren't actually bad for each other, because the second cop isn't dishonest and the heroine's family isn't controlling. But it's only logical that, at first, the pairing appears to be a very bad combination; and it's also logical that it takes a while for the characters to figure out that things are different this time around.

In Beth Cornelison's *In Protective Custody*, Max and the heroine, Laura, are on the run to protect Max's newborn nephew. But each of them has an internal reason why playing house, pretending to be a family, and falling in love are all very bad ideas. Max is still recuperating from a marriage that failed because he couldn't father children:

It had been three years since he'd slept with a woman. More like six years since he'd made love for the sake of pleasure and sexual gratification.

In the final years of his marriage, sex had been about ovulation and conception and maximizing windows of opportunity. ... Knowing he couldn't get a woman pregnant had struck a massive blow to his sense of masculinity.

Meanwhile, Laura—the product of a long series of foster homes—wants nothing more than a family of her own.

The desperate yearning for her own baby, a desire she'd suppressed for years, blossomed inside her and left a hollow ache in her soul. How could she ever have children of her own when she was scared to death of forming a relationship with a man? ... She could never risk that sort of betrayal and abandonment. Hadn't the difficult years, bouncing between foster homes, left enough scars?

Is there anyone who could be worse for a woman who's longing for a family than a guy who can't give her a baby? Is there anyone who could be worse for a man with a shaky sense of masculinity than a woman who's skittish about trusting men at all?

How the Short- and Long-Term Problems Fit Together

A character's short-term and *long-term* problems need to be closely related, because the short-term problem focuses a spotlight on the long-term one. The immediate, life-altering threat or challenge (the short-term problem) is what forces the character to own up to and deal with the character flaw or the troublesome past experience (the long-term problem).

The long-term problem is the reason a character finds a particular short-term problem so hard to face. When Beth Cornelison saddles her hero-who-can't-be-a-father and her heroine-who-wants-to-be-a-mom with an infant, it's like holding a magnifying glass on their long-term problems. A different sort of short-term problem would have had much less emotional appeal.

When the immediate difficulty (the short-term problem or external conflict) the hero and heroine face is complicated by the kind of people they are (the character flaw or past experience that is the long-term problem or internal conflict), then you have the potential for a deeply emotional story that the readers can never forget.

For instance, if an infant were dumped on the hero's doorstep with a note implying that the hero is the father, any heroine would be upset. But for a heroine who was raised in an orphanage and who has struggled with her own issues of abandonment, this situation would be particularly horrible. How could the hero not know about his baby? How could he have turned his back on his child?

If the short-term problem is that your hero has suddenly lost all his money, perhaps the long-term one is that he's always bought whatever he wanted—and that, in his experience, others liked him mostly for what he could give them. Because he's always been able to buy everything, the loss of money is more difficult for him to hear than it would be for someone who was less materialistic to begin with.

If the long-term problem is that the young widow refuses to deal with her loss and go on with her life, perhaps the short-term problem is that she is suddenly forced to move out of the home she shared with her husband. Nobody

likes to lose a home, but because she has turned the house into a shrine for her late husband, having to move would be a bigger blow for her than it would be for other people.

Developing Complementary Short- and Long-Term Problems

In a romance novel, the long-term problem for each character is always, in essence, what tendency or flaw makes it difficult for the couple to end up together. In each story, however, the precise problem is different.

Can Mary overcome the trauma of her family's poverty and accept that John is not really a free-spending gambler like her father?

That's a long-term problem—the effect of her father's gambling on the family is a past experience that colors everything in Mary's life today. If you then establish that John owns the casino where Mary's father gambled, and begin the story with Mary trying to find a way to close it down or to convince John to return enough of her father's losses to allow her mother to get necessary medical treatment, then you have tension-producing short- and long-term problems that are closely related and intolerable for the character.

Meanwhile, John will have a long-term problem of his own. It may be every bit as huge as Mary's (childhood experiences have left him addicted to risk), or it may be smaller (he's inherited the casino and he'd like to simply close it down, but that would throw hundreds of people out of work; he can't in good conscience sell it to another operator, because he's actually opposed to gambling).

Often, if one character's long-term problem is huge, the other's problem is more manageable—but each of them will have a long-term problem, a past experience or character flaw that causes trouble in the present. In the most effective stories, the long-term problems of the two characters put them in opposition to each other, in addition to the complications of their short-term problems.

THE FORCE

As you develop your short- and long-term problems, keep in mind that because your two characters have so many reasons to disagree and so many things keeping them apart,

they need a really good reason to stick around at all. Under ordinary circumstances, when you're frustrated by someone, you just avoid him—you don't hang around long enough to fall in love. In fact, unless they're family members or co-workers, you might even avoid such annoying people entirely.

Realistic characters will do the same thing—walk away unless they're forced to stay. What requires the hero and heroine to stay in the same space long enough to realize that, despite their differences, they're perfect for each other?

In a romance novel, the situation that makes it impossible for the characters to avoid each other is called *the force*.

Sometimes the force is built in to the short-term problem—maybe your heroine's life is in danger, and the hero is assigned to protect her. But in other cases, you have to look a little deeper. Does your couple need to cooperate in order to succeed? If they're both assigned to a project, perhaps their jobs depend on making it work. Do they desperately need each other's help? Maybe your heroine is in danger, and the hero is the only one who can protect her. Do circumstances force them into close contact? Perhaps they're stranded together by an accident.

For a romance to be successful, it has to have a force in the form of one of these three scenarios:

1. The hero and heroine must need each other so badly they can't just walk away. She needs his help as a doctor in order to have the baby she wants, and he needs a wife or he'll lose his job in the medical practice.

2. Either the hero or the heroine has a logical and valid reason for forcing the other into the situation. He thinks she's cheated a charity and challenges her to prove him wrong or he'll ruin her business.

3. Outside influences conspire to keep them in close proximity. He's inherited a piece of property and has to do something with it; she's under pressure to acquire the property by any means. Or, they're trapped together by an ice storm in an isolated cabin.

The strength of the force required to keep the characters together will depend on the intensity of the conflict. The more painful the circumstances are, the more eager a person will be to escape. So, if the conflict is very intense and very personal, the force will need to be correspondingly strong to make the character stay in that situation. If the conflict is less threatening, then less force is required.

How can you raise the stakes for your hero and heroine so they can't possibly walk away?

In this example from her short contemporary *The Italian's Price*, Diana Hamilton's hero makes it clear that her heroine has no option but to cooperate—or go to jail:

It was all too real.

He turned and headed for the door, his stride lithe and totally assured, his shoulders straight and elegant. He opened the door, admitting damp air. "I will collect you at six in

the morning. Be ready. If you attempt to disappear again, be sure that I will find you. Be very sure of that."

He turned then, his stunning eyes hard and cold. "In the event of your non-compliance to my demands, I shall have no hesitation in hauling you through the courts and seeing you behind bars. My desire to protect my grandmother from the pain of

discovering that the hired companion she had grown to trust, rely on and love was nothing more than a devious thief is strong. But even that has its limits."

Hamilton chooses the second of the three possibilities for creating force—the hero in this case believes that the heroine is a thief and is forcing her to make good.

Resolving Your Story's Conflict

It's important to remember that the problem your characters face must be solvable in the end so you can create a satisfying conclusion. That sounds painfully obvious, but occasionally an inexperienced writer comes up with a problem so real and so complex that a truly happy ending—a believable compromise or agreement between the characters—is inconceivable.

What kind of problem will create real disagreement between your main characters for the entire length of the book, yet allow them to find a solution or compromise that will satisfy both of them—and the readers, too? What type of solution will achieve your happy ending without being so obvious that your heroic pair look like dorks for not seeing it immediately?



IN REVIEW: Studying Conflict

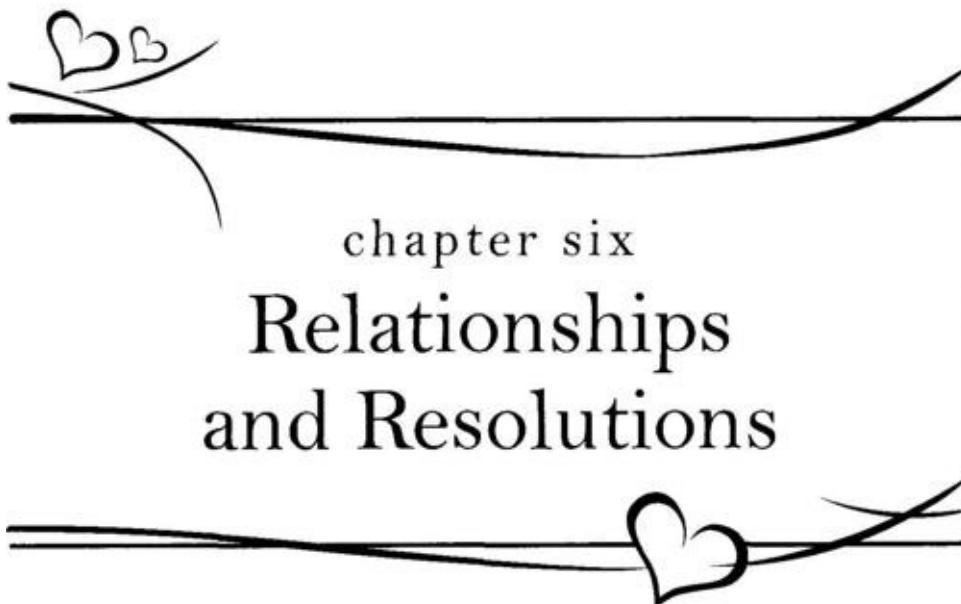
1. Consider the romance novels you've been studying. In each book, what was the heroine's short-term problem? Her long-term problem?
2. What was the hero's short-term problem? Long-term problem?
3. What was the story element forcing them to stay together? How did their problems relate to each other?



Creating Your Conflict

1. What is your heroine's short-term problem?
2. What is your hero's short-term problem?
3. How are the two problems related?
4. How do these problems come to the readers' attention?
5. How does your heroine's short-term problem grow worse?
6. How does your hero's short-term problem grow worse?
7. What is your heroine's long-term problem?
8. What is your hero's long-term problem?

9. How are the two problems related to each other?
10. How are the long-term problems of each character related to their short-term problems?



chapter six

Relationships and Resolutions

The core of the romance novel is the developing love story—the key word being *developing*. The readers pick up a romance because they want to watch the hero and heroine fall in love. They don't want the old treat-each-other-like-crap-then-declare-mutual-love-on-the-last-page gimmick. They want to follow along as these people get acquainted, as they discover and nourish warm feelings for each other, as they realize they are in love.

The love story isn't the same as the plot (which is unfolding at the same time, in parallel), but it's connected to the plot. Each event shows the lovers to each other in a new light and lets them make fresh observations and discoveries about each other.

As you develop the framework of your story, keep in mind the importance of the characters' reactions to each other. Two hallmarks of unsuccessful romance novels are hatred at first sight and lust at first sight.

FALLING IN HATE

In many romance manuscripts, the hero and heroine meet for the first time and instantly fall in *hate*—often with very little reason for such a strong reaction. I'm not talking about them taking a dislike to each other or getting a bad first impression. I'm also not talking about people who knew each other before and were hurt by their past encounters, because it makes sense that they'd be wary of another round.

But many heroes and heroines leap to judgment in their first encounter—drawing conclusions violently and quickly on very little evidence—and then stay stuck in

that mindset. The longer it takes them to sort out the misunderstanding, the worse they look to the readers. But if you've set up their misunderstanding as the main conflict, you can't solve it quickly or easily, because then you've got no story left.

The biggest difficulty with the hatred-at-first-sight scenario isn't actually the

misunderstanding between the characters, because sooner or later that will be cleared up. The problem is the type of people they've shown themselves to be. If they're so judgmental about someone they know nothing about, and so unwilling to take a second look before writing off another human being, what hope is there that they can ever be open-minded enough to make a marriage survive?

FALLING IN LUST

Many characters in unsuccessful romance manuscripts lay eyes on each other and instantly fall in lust. One glance and they're gone—totally smitten. He's been looking all his life for the right woman, and here she is; he just has to convince her to get married. Or the heroine's nourished a crush on this guy for a while, and suddenly he notices her and now she's over the moon.

Stunning, sudden, overwhelming attraction doesn't often lead to convincing love stories. If these two people are so aware of their feelings, what's standing in the way of them getting together? Unless it's a very strong conflict, it's hard to believe they can't work out their difficulties so they can ride off into the sunset and indulge in their attraction.

If the heroine's long-term problem is that she doesn't believe in marriage, but the short-term problem is simply that the hero wants to marry her, it's obvious that she's going to change her mind; it's a romance. But if she's open to changing her mind at all, why couldn't that happen in chapter two instead of at the end? You need something else going on—a strong conflict—to convincingly explain why these two people need time to solve their differences.

Physical attraction is not love. While it's an important part of the romance and the fantasy, it's not enough to sustain a true relationship. The heroine who can only think of the hero's great physique, or the hero who can't get beyond how his groin tingles when he catches sight of the heroine's sexy curves, isn't a very good candidate for lasting love. Heroes and heroines who have their tongues hanging out for each other before they know much more than their idol's name aren't in love, they're only suffering from hormones. Attraction can certainly lead to love, but they're two different things.

Awareness, on the other hand, is a necessary part of the romance. From the beginning, your hero and heroine should be alert to the presence of the other. The senses of each should be heightened where the other main character is concerned. They should be more attentive to each other than to others surrounding them. Each should notice what the other says and does. They may write off this awareness as purely sexual attraction, or they may not recognize that it has any basis at all in physical desire. They may believe that their awareness of each other comes from dislike or distaste for the other person.

In Raeanne Thayne's long contemporary *Dalton's Undoing*, the heroine's teenage son has stolen and wrecked the hero's classic car. Yet when Seth Dalton, the hero, offers to let the teenager work off his debt rather than face criminal charges, Jenny, the heroine, has a very mixed reaction:

Her gut wanted to tell him to forget it. She didn't want her son to have anything to do

with Pine Gulch's busiest bachelor.

[Her son] had had enough lousy male role models in his life—he didn't need a player like Seth teaching him all the wrong things about how to treat a woman.

... Seth Dalton was being surprisingly decent about this ... [S]he would have expected him to be hot-tempered and petulant.

Instead, she found him rational, calm, accommodating.

And extremely attractive.

She let out a slow, nervous breath. Was that the reason for her instinctive opposition to the man's reasonable proposal? Because he was sinfully gorgeous with that thick, dark hair, eyes a stunning, heartbreakingly blue and chiseled, tanned features that made him look as though he should be starring in Western movies?

He made her edgy and ill at ease and that alone gave her enough reason to wish for a way to avoid any further acquaintance between them. She was here in Pine Gulch to help her little family find some peace and healing—not to engage in useless, potentially harmful fantasies about a charming, feckless cowboy with impossibly blue eyes and a smile that oozed sex.

Jenny has excellent reasons for being attracted—not only by Seth's good looks but by his sex appeal and his willingness to rescue her son from criminal proceedings—but she also has excellent reasons for trying to fight off her attraction, because giving in to it may put her son at risk.

BALANCING ATTRACTION WITH REASON

For a romance novel to be successful, the hero and heroine must be drawn together by something more than mere physical desire. They must have logical and believable reasons for liking each other, as well as for being angry or frustrated with each other, in order for the love story to be convincing.

People who feel nothing for each other between the extremes of anger and lust, or who see nothing attractive about the other person except in a sexual way, are not believable lovers. What else do your characters see in each other besides physical attractiveness? What reasons do they have to like each other? What reasons do they have to trust each other?

Tenderness, caring, respect, a sense of humor—these are important building blocks of lasting love, and they're every bit as important as *the physical reactions*.

Of course, if you overdo the trust and the nurturing and the tenderness and the jokes, you've got a cozy little duo who are merely going through the motions for 60,000 words or so before they can finally get to the happy ending.

This is why it's so important to have a real, believable, honest conflict between these people—not just a misunderstanding, not just the interference of another person, not just an unwillingness to admit that they're attracted to each other, and not just superficial nastiness, but a real problem that causes tension between these two characters. Then,

against the background of that problem, you must show these two people struggling to deny fate and ultimately realizing that, despite their disagreement, the other is the one person who means the world to them.

THE ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME LOVE

The love between your hero and heroine needs to be the kind that appears only once in a lifetime. That means the readers must be convinced that this couple is the best possible romantic combination—that they’re the perfect fit for each other. So it’s not enough for the hero and heroine simply to fall in love, especially if it seems that any one of a dozen other men (or women) would do just as well. What makes this couple absolutely right for each other, better than anyone else could ever be?

In many a beginner’s story, the conflict is that the hero is still deeply in love with his late wife—in fact, he’s so wounded that it’s hard to believe the heroine could ever be anything more than a feeble substitute. But such a story line is unsatisfying for the readers, who want *this* couple to be the perfect fit.

That doesn’t mean you have to make the late wife utterly nasty, but in some way the new romance should offer more potential for deep and lasting happiness than his previous marriage did, or ever could have.

How are your main characters the best combination that could be imagined? In this example, from Lisa Cach’s chick-lit novella *Return to Sender*; the hero enunciates what he’s looking for in a relationship:

[Ian’s] dark blue eyes locked with mine, his expression intense. “I want to know that a woman wants me, Ian McLaughlin. Not just that I’m the right age and have the right income, and treat my mother well. I want to feel that a woman’s world would not be complete without me; that I gave her something that no one else *in* the world could. That she found something in me that made her feel that she had come home after a long journey through a cold and lonely winter, and that she could never find exactly that same feeling with anyone else.”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t answer. ... I hadn’t known that a man could need to be needed in that way.

Ian’s definition of a onee-in-a-lifetime love and his unwillingness to settle for less helps to make him a fascinating hero.

HOW TO RUIN A RELATIONSHIP

The developing love story, when well written, is like a river. Sometimes it moves slowly, sometimes it runs fast. Sometimes it’s lazy and carefree, sometimes it’s threatening and scary. Sometimes its course is level and smooth, sometimes it boils into rapids. Water, once set in motion, will wear away anything that stands in its path. In the same way, the love developing between the two main characters, once it is set in motion, should wear away the objections, problems, and differences that stand in its path.

This concept is easy to understand in the abstract, but applying it to the story is a little harder. So let’s approach it by studying the ways you can diminish the romance, push it

out of its place in the spotlight, and destroy the developing love story:

- **Develop a too-complex plot and background.** If you can't describe your characters' disagreement in a brief sentence, the conflict may be too complex, and you may find *yourself* spending time explaining the details instead of developing the story. The same goes for jobs—if you have to explain in depth what the heroine does for a living, maybe your story would be better off if she had a different, more straightforward career.

- **Overload the story with too many technical details.** If the hero, a pro golfer, is giving lessons to the heroine, a sales manager who has to learn the game, and you detail every golf term, shot, stance, club, and piece of gear, your readers will be ready to scream. Golfers know all this and will be bored. Nongolfers don't care.

- **Separate the hero and heroine.** If his job is to catch poachers in the national forest and hers is to babysit his kid back home, when are they going to spend time together? How are they going to have a chance to get to know each other, much less fall in love?

- **Have the hero and heroine talk about each other instead of to each other.** If the hero and heroine meet in the first chapter and exchange three sentences, and then you use the rest of the chapter to show the hero having dinner with his extended family and telling them all *about* how great the heroine was, what she'd said to him, what he'd said to her, and what her accent was like, the readers will go to the mall instead of reading chapter two.

- **Bring in lots of characters.** Tell us all about them. Let them take over the story. If you spend an entire chapter introducing every member of the hero's family and providing extensive histories for each, the readers are likely to drop the book.

- **Let everybody think a lot.** It's a great deal easier to let the characters get introspective—to show them rambling on in their heads about what the other one said, did, or might have been thinking—than it is to present a real conversation, with real issues and disagreements.

HOW TO MAKE A RELATIONSHIP WORK

There are several techniques that will help deal with these potential problems, but all of them have one thing in common: They keep the focus on the hero and heroine, not on the other things that may be going on in the story. Try to:

- **Follow the ten-page rule.** Never let your hero and heroine be physically separated for more than ten pages at a time. Sometimes this is stated as the five-page rule, or even the three-page rule; the point is that your hero and heroine can't interact if they're not in the same location (or at least in contact, perhaps by phone or even e-mail). If you have a scene in which one is on stage alone or with secondary characters, follow it up with a scene in which both are involved.

- **Tweak the plot to keep the hero and heroine together.** When one of them is involved in a given situation, how can the other be brought in as well? If the hero is a ranger out to catch poachers, give your heroine a reason to be out in the national forest near the hero, instead of safely at home. Is she painting calendar art of the wildlife?

Studying flowers for her botany class? Maybe she's got a deadline, so not only has she disobeyed his request to stay out of the danger zone, she's brought his kid along. (Now there's a potential conflict.)

- **Keep the hero and heroine alone together whenever possible.** Keep the focus on your couple and their relationship by sending the kid out to play or having the friend excuse herself. If the hero and heroine are in a crowded room, have them move off to a quiet corner. The dialogue will be better, as well as easier to write, and it will help you keep the relationship at center stage.

- **Show the hero and heroine in a variety of settings and moods.** Your romantic couple shouldn't always be at each other's throats. Real people (the ones we want to be around) aren't angry all the time, and your characters shouldn't be either.

- **Use dialogue between the hero and heroine to insert action or information that is important to the plot but tangential to the romance.** If the

heroine and her friend make an important discovery that seriously affects the plot action, you can show the two women at that moment. But it might be

better for the story if, instead, you wrote a scene in which the heroine tells the hero what they've discovered.

- **Put your hero and heroine in a situation they can't escape.** Create a situation that requires them to deal with each other, no matter how much they'd like to just walk away.

IN REVIEW: Studying the Once-in-a-Lifetime Love



Think about the romance novels you've been studying. How did each hero and heroine feel about each other on first meeting? At what point in the story did you know that the heroine wanted a lifetime relationship with the hero? When did you know that the hero wanted a lifetime relationship with the heroine? At that point in the story, were there still problems that made you wonder whether the two would be able to reach a happy ending?

How did the author balance attraction, awareness, and conflict? What steps did the relationship go through between first meeting and happy ending? What evidence did you see of the couple's growing attachment to each other?

Creating Your Once-in-a-Lifetime Love



1. What **character** traits does **your heroine** find attractive **in your hero?** What character traits does your hero find attractive in your heroine?

2. How do they feel about each other when they meet? Why do they feel that way?

3. How do their feelings for each other change? What incidents make them see the other person differently?

THE RESOLUTION

How are you going to resolve the issues you've created between your characters? How will you find solutions to their difficulties and disagreements?

If you're dealing with characters whose core values—the things they find most important in life—are wildly different, you'd be wise to figure out how they'll reach a compromise *before* you get into the story.

If he's a mink rancher and she's an animal-rights activist—and each has tried to convince the other to think differently all through the book—how are you going to solve that problem in a believable way? There's not much room for compromise in that situation—if one of them gives in, are they going to be happy for long? What does a change of heart tell readers about the strength of the character's original convictions? If his dedication to his beliefs is so shallow that he can simply change them, is he a heroic character? And if she was willing to give up

animal-rights activism, or he wasn't all that fond of mink ranching anyway, then why did they wait until the last chapter to reach a compromise? If the issue turns out to be not so important after all, why couldn't they agree earlier?

In a case like that, you'd be better off giving one or both of them a different sort of cause to be passionate about—and realizing that up front, before you've written half the book, will save you a great deal of effort and frustration.

An ending is most satisfying when it requires both the hero and the heroine to give up something for the sake of their love. This establishes a basic equality in the relationship, and it also makes the conflict resolution more believable. If one person giving in would have solved the difficulty, why did it take them so long to reach that point?

A solution is most satisfying when the characters figure it out for themselves, not when someone else comes up with the answer. If this couple would never have gotten together or worked out their problem without the help of the secondary characters, the readers will have doubts about how they'll handle future difficulties. Make sure your hero and heroine sort out their disagreement themselves, together.



IN REVIEW: Studying the Resolution

1. In the romance novels you've been studying, what was the happy ending for each couple? How did the happy endings come about?
2. Did the characters solve their differences through their own actions, or was there interference by other characters?
3. How were the main issues of the story resolved—did either the hero or heroine give in, or was there a compromise?
4. Did the happy ending startle you, or had you predicted how the couple would solve their problems?



Creating Your Resolution

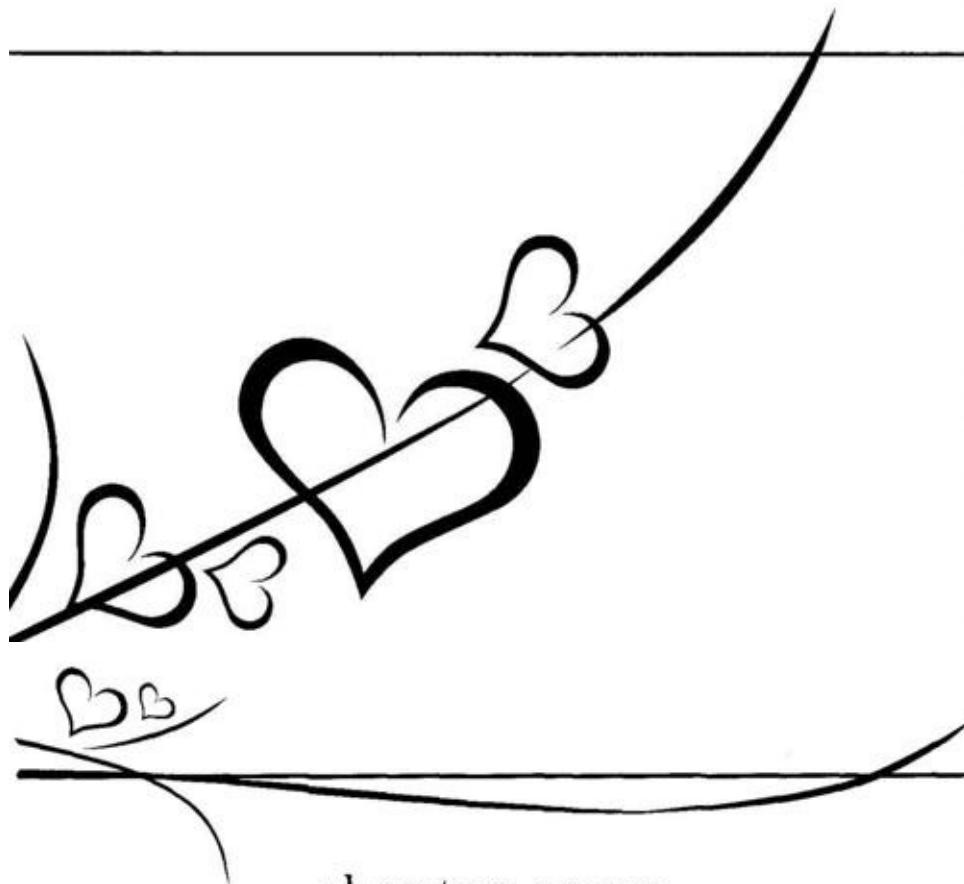
1. How will you resolve the short-term problem of each main character?
2. How does the resolution of the short-term problems contribute to the resolution of the long-term problems?

3. How do your main characters contribute to the solution of their own problems?
4. If either your hero or heroine gives in to solve the problem, why couldn't they have made this decision earlier?
5. If the hero and heroine have a difference in core values, how will they compromise to achieve a solution that is satisfactory for both of them?
6. In what ways will you make the solution of the characters' problems unexpected for the readers?

part three

Writing Your

Romance Novel



chapter seven

Starting to Write Your Story



Figuring out where to start telling your story is one of the bigger challenges you face. Do you show the hero and heroine together, or do you begin with just one of them? Do you start with the heroine at work or at home, or the hero with his family or at his job? Do you show the character talking, acting, or thinking? Should you begin with the characters in normal life or absorbed in the threat or problem that will change the rest of their life?

You have limited time and space—a few pages, at most—to seize your readers' interest.

If you start too slowly and include too much of the characters' history, the readers may get tired of waiting for the interesting stuff to start. If you start too fast, with too much action, they may get confused. Either miscalculation may make the readers put the book down and never pick it up again.

STARTING TOO EARLY

Readers will put down your book if you fail to catch their interest right at the beginning. If they lose interest—or never develop any interest—chances are you started telling your story too early.

Starting too early usually means beginning with the background—the roots of the story—rather than with the story itself. If the heroine is returning to her hometown for the first time in years because her father's had a heart attack, then starting page one with her getting the phone call about his illness is probably starting too early, as is starting with her packing her suitcase and rushing to the airport or starting with her biting her nails on the plane. The *story* is what happens once she actually gets home and runs into the hero.

The first chapter of a beginner's manuscript can often be chopped off altogether, because it's all history and the story itself starts unfolding at the beginning of chapter two. Sometimes the author tells all about the heroine's past without sharing information about the problem that is going to change her life. Or she introduces too many characters, confusing the readers about who's who.

There are two reasons why writers tend to start the story too soon. First, it's instinctual to put the background of the story right up front. After all, the readers need to know this stuff in order to understand what's going on—don't they?

Well, yes. Eventually.

The trouble is that if you give the readers all the background before you make them care about the character, the background is wasted and you may lose the readers entirely. But once readers have formed an emotional connection with the character, they'll sit still for all kinds of explanations and backstory.

The second reason why authors tend to start the story too early is that the background is the part of the story they know best. They figured it out in the process of developing their main characters and problems, so it's tempting to get it out of the way before starting to write the difficult stuff.

So what's the solution? Go right ahead and do it. Write down in excruciating detail what brought your main character to this point in her life. Print it out and hang it up beside the computer for future reference—and then start writing the *mil* chapter one.

STARTING TOO LATE

It's also possible to start the story too late, far enough into the action that the readers feel lost and left out and are never quite able to catch up.

Starting too late usually happens when the author, who already knows a great deal about her characters because of all the research and planning she's done, forgets that her readers

don't have access to all the information she's created. The readers only know what the writer tells them. So even if the writer knows that these two main characters are lovely people who are just right for each other, if the story starts with the hero and heroine shrieking abuse at one another, the readers may not hang around long enough to see how wonderful they are.

Starting with action is usually good, but if page one starts with a very complex event, the readers will be lost. If they don't know who the main characters are, starting the book with a big group of people will leave the readers feeling unconnected to any of the characters. If they don't have any idea of what the main problem will be, picking up in the middle of a complicated argument will only confuse them.

In all those cases, backing up just a little—introducing the main characters first, and then putting them in the situation that will change their lives—is a better plan.

The readers' introduction to the characters need not be lengthy or complex. Often, even a few paragraphs is enough to establish each character, make a positive impression, and introduce the situation.

Starting too late is a particularly common problem in paranormal romances in which the author sets up a world or society that's very different from reality. The *more* unusual the setting, background, and characters, the more help the readers need to understand what's going on. Again, a long explanation isn't necessary, but starting with a bit of calm—so the readers can get a glimpse of the characters' very different world before all the trouble breaks loose—is usually a good idea.

Starting too late is also a common difficulty with romantic suspense novels and romantic mysteries, especially if the characters are put in danger *before* the readers have begun to care what happens to them.

PAGE ONE

Every story has a number of potential beginning points, but a book can only have one, the moment when chapter one begins and the readers are first introduced to the characters and the situation. The challenge for the author is to find the best place in the story to bring the readers in. At what moment does the curtain go up so the readers can begin to observe?

You should be able to convincingly answer the question, *Why does page one pick up the story at the moment it does?*

At what point can you begin telling this story in order to capture the readers' attention most effectively, without boring them with background or confusing them with action they don't yet understand?

The best beginnings show—within the first few pages or even paragraphs—the main character under pressure and facing a challenge, a change in circumstances, or a threat that will significantly alter the rest of her life.

Where to Start

There are no hard-and-fast rules for exactly how to begin your book, but certain starting setups have proven successful over time. When you're deciding where and when to begin, keep the following options in mind:

1. Start with one of your two main characters. The readers expect the first character they meet in the story to be either the hero or the heroine (though most often it's the heroine), and they're immediately prepared to care about this person. If you start instead with the heroine's friend or the hero's barber, tin-readers will be confused.

In this opening paragraph from her historical novella *The Bake's Bride*, Nicola Cornick not only introduces her hero but gives us a thumbnail sketch of his history.

The April sunlight was as blinding as a flash of gunpowder and the rattle of the bed curtains **sounded** like distant artillery fire. For a moment Jack, Marquis of Merlin, wondered if he had gone to hell and ended back in the Peninsula War.

After two brief sentences, we know how the hero fits into society, what his history has been, and what time of year it is—but most importantly, we know exactly who the hero of this story is going to be, and we have a pretty good idea why we'll be rooting for this war veteran to find love: as a reward for the hell he's been through.

In the opening paragraphs of her historic novella *The Virtuous Widow*, Anne Gracie establishes her heroine and the basic situation she faces:

“Is my wishing candle still burning, Mama?”

Ellie kissed her small daughter tenderly. “Yes, darling. It hasn’t gone out. Now stop your worrying and go to sleep. The candle is downstairs in the window where you put it.”

“Shining out into the darkness so Papa will see it and know where we are.” Ellie hesitated. Her voice was husky as she replied, “Yes, my darling. Papa will know that we are here, safe and **warm**.”

Amy snuggled down under the threadbare blankets and the faded patchwork quilt that covered them. “And in the morning he will be with us for breakfast.”

A lump caught in Ellie’s throat. “No, darling. Papa will not be there. You know that.”

Notice that even though a secondary character speaks the first line, the first *name* used is that of the heroine, and that name focuses our attention on her. It isn’t until the fifth paragraph, after we’ve gotten a quick glimpse of the heroine’s emotions as she soothes her daughter, that Gracie gives us the name of the secondary character.

The single exception to starting the story with either the hero or the heroine is in a brief prologue before the main story begins. You can focus that bit of the narrative on an important secondary character—like the villain—because it’s clear that a prologue is a preview and not the story itself. Chapter one should still start with either the hero or the heroine (or both).

2. Start with action. Often a good option is to show the main character at the point when that character’s life is disrupted by some kind of danger or threat. The danger doesn’t have to be life-threatening, and it’s better if it isn’t complex and doesn’t require

lengthy explanation.

Starting with action is particularly effective when the situation is easily understood or the peril is something the readers can relate to—as in this example from Liz Fielding’s sweet traditional *The Billionaire Takes a Bride*.

His was a mistake. ... Every cell in Ginny’s body was slamming on the brakes, digging in its heels, trying to claw its way back behind the safety of the rain-soaked hedge

that divided her roof top terrace from the raked perfection of Richard Mallory’s Japanese garden. ...

Her boots had left deep impressions in the damp gravel. So much for stealth. She was not cut out for burglary.

Fielding makes it clear that her heroine is no ordinary criminal, so the readers are intrigued into reading more to find out what’s really going on.

3. Start with the character’s normal routine. Give readers a glimpse of the character’s life in the moments before the conflict starts. If you very briefly describe your character’s accustomed lifestyle, her normal personality traits, and her usual existence, readers will feel sympathy for her when this pattern is abruptly interrupted.

In her single title *Girls Night*, Stef Ann Holm shows her heroine trying to take a relaxing bath. Who can’t relate to a mother who just wants a few minutes of peace?

All Jillene McDermott wanted was a little breathing room and the only place she could find it was in the bathtub.

Even though she wouldn’t be lucky enough to have the tub all to herself before the bubbles went flat and the water cooled, she’d take every minute she could get.

But we also know that Jillene’s peaceful bath isn’t going to last long, and by telling us that even Jillene realizes that, Holm hints that there are bigger changes coming soon.

4. Start with an attention-getting statement. When the readers are presented with something they don’t expect, as in Maureen Child’s single title *Some Kind of Wonderful*, they will read on to find out what the heck’s happening:

Baby Jesus moved.

Carol Baker blinked and shook her head. “Okay, Carol. When you start seeing statues move, it’s either a miracle or you’ve got problems.” She stared hard at the brightly lit, life-sized Nativity scene that filled one corner of the town square. ... “Okay, Baby Jesus is definitely moving.”

Within a few paragraphs, we find out that “Baby Jesus” is actually an abandoned infant, and the heroine finds her life taking a dramatic turn.

Where Not to Start

Just as there are some good ideas for starting your first page, there are some not-so-good ones, too:

1. Do not start with a flashback or include one in the first chapter. Flashbacks are confusing when the readers haven't yet established a connection with the characters and the story.

2. Do not start with a dream or with a character waking up. A dream sequence is usually confusing and hard to explain. Starting with a character waking up is almost always a variation on starting too soon. Instead, begin with the character's first important action.

3. Do not start with a long descriptive passage. Beginning with a sentence or two of description to provide context is often useful, but readers want to get acquainted with the characters, and they're usually interested in the background and the scenery only as it affects the characters.

Prologues

A prologue is a very short scene (one to two pages, in most cases) from a time before the present-day story begins. A good prologue is limited to precisely what the readers need to know to draw them into the story. Most often, it is a brief, intriguing glimpse of a mysterious aspect of the story or the main characters. It can also be a snippet from a time long before the beginning of the story, if that event is extraordinarily important to understanding the later action.

Romantic suspense novels sometimes use prologues to great effect because they allow the author to introduce the mystery and the villain to the readers long before the main characters have any reason to think they're threatened. Romances that involve characters meeting again after a long separation occasionally make good use of a prologue to show a dramatic, defining, long-ago moment between the characters.

But few stories really benefit from a prologue. Prologues often hurt the story by going on too long or by giving away information about the characters' motivations too soon, destroying the suspense. Many so-called prologues—especially in the work of beginners—are actually lengthy introductions telling all about a character's life up to the point where the story starts. Such prologues are evidence that the author has started telling her story too soon.

In her historical single title *The Viscount Who Loved Me*, author Julia Quinn effectively uses a prologue to explain an anomaly in her hero's character that makes him unwilling to fall in love:

Anthony Bridgerton had always known he would die young. ...

It happened when Anthony was eighteen. ...

Anthony stopped short when he saw Daphne. It was odd enough that his sister was sitting in the middle of the floor in the main hall. It was even more odd that she was crying. ...

“He’s dead,” Daphne whispered. “Papa is dead. ... He was stung by a bee. ...”

A man couldn’t die from a bee sting. It was impossible. Utterly mad. Edmund

Bridgerton was young, he was strong ... no insignificant honeybee could have felled him.

...

He walked into the room where his father's body still lay and looked at him. ...

And when he left the room, he left with a new vision of his own life, and new knowledge about his own mortality.

Edmund Bridgerton had died at the age of thirty-eight. And Anthony simply couldn't imagine ever surpassing his father in any way, even in years.

The main reason for this prologue is to set up Anthony's conviction that he must not allow himself to fall in love because he—like his father—will not live past forty, and so his wife would certainly become a widow. The complete prologue is longer than most (seven pages in all), but everything in the prologue relates to that single event and its effect on the hero.

In most cases, it's better to keep the hero's reasons for avoiding love confidential for a while, often until near the end of the story. If Quinn had waited to share that information until the last chapter or two, however, the readers would likely have found Anthony's reasons inadequate and unconvincing. But since the readers start the story accepting (though not necessarily agreeing with) Anthony's belief, they understand why he acts as he does nearly fifteen years after the event detailed in the prologue.

CHAPTER ONE

The most important goals of your first chapter are (1) to introduce your main characters to the readers, (2) to establish the conflict between the characters, and (3) to make the readers care so much about the hero, the heroine, and their problems that they can't put the book down.

Though you will probably include more than just the two main characters in the first scene, try not to introduce your whole cast right away. There will be plenty of time to bring other people into the story, but you only have one chance to establish your main characters as interesting, important, and sympathetic.

The first chapter should focus on the main characters, who they are, and why the change or challenge they face is a serious threat to them. The most effective way to do this is to show the hero and heroine in action. Don't make the mistake of simply telling your readers about them.

The first chapter should show the hero and the heroine confronting the initial problem or problems. By the end of the first chapter of Maureen Child's *Some Kind of Wonderful* (opening lines on page 86), Carol has not only discovered an abandoned infant, she is named as the child's temporary foster mother. She meets the sheriff who will be investigating the abandonment, and he makes it clear he's suspicious of Carol and will be keeping an eye on her. The readers know this situation will be particularly challenging for Carol because she herself was abandoned as a child.

By the end of the first chapter of Anne Gracie's *The Virtuous Widow* (opening lines on page 85), a badly wounded man, drawn by the light of her daughter's wishing candle,

stumbles into Ellie's cottage. Ellie takes him in, then tries to explain to her daughter that he is not the father the child barely remembers. She tucks him into her own bed and—because the cottage is small and cold and there's only one bed—she climbs in with him to keep them both from freezing. By the end of the first chapter, Gracie has introduced her main characters, established the conflict and a couple of complicating factors, and started to build sexual tension between the hero and heroine.

CREATING A SENSE OF EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT

If you put your main characters in danger before you've let your readers get well acquainted with them, it's harder for the readers to care what happens. If the tornado wipes out the town in the first scene, the readers will be intellectually sorry about the casualties, but they won't be shedding any tears. On the other hand, if the readers have come to know and care about these people, and *then* the twister sweeps through, they're going to be sitting on the edge of their seats, hoping against hope the characters will be all right.

A wise writer once said, "Show me the pictures in the soldier's wallet before you lull him." A dead soldier on a battlefield is one of many—very sad, but easy to lose track of in the multitude. If, however, the readers know that his pockets contain a picture of his little girl, a letter from his mother, and a lock of hair from his sweetheart, he becomes a real person and his tragedy becomes an emotional upheaval.

Give your readers enough information so they can form an emotional attachment to the character *before* you put that character in serious physical or psychological danger.

Anne Gracie's hero in *The Virtuous Widow* is seriously wounded when he first appears. Though we care about his condition, we don't yet have an emotional reaction to the danger he's in. We have, however, gotten emotionally attached to the heroine, and we can quickly understand why having a badly wounded man on her hands is going to threaten her entire way of life.

CREATING A POSITIVE FIRST IMPRESSION

If you want your readers to like your main characters, your main characters need to be likeable. Frequently, beginning writers first present their main characters in a very negative way—the heroine is swearing at her mother, or the hero is throwing things at his secretary. When readers point out that they don't like the characters, the writer is devastated because *she* knows these people are really wonderful. What she may not realize is that she hasn't given the *readers* any rea-

son to like the character. If the readers understand why the heroine is swearing at her mother (or better yet, see her wanting to swear but restraining herself), then they'll be more sympathetic.

Main characters can't be perfect, but neither should they be awful. Show a mix of qualities, but bring some of the good ones in early—before showing the readers the characters' warts, or at least at the same time. The readers will then be willing to give the characters the benefit of the doubt, and they'll read further to find out why they're behaving the way they are.

In the example on page 86 from *Girls Night*, Stef Ann Holm presents Jillene sympathetically by putting her in a situation nearly every woman (and certainly every mother) has faced—having to shut herself in the bathroom to get just a moment of peace and quiet. If a character like Nicola Cornick’s Jack, Marquis of Merlin, from *The Rake’s Bride* (page 85), were to come up out of his bed swinging at the valet who is opening his curtains, the author could redeem him by having him apologize, balancing out any injury he’d caused. His action would be more sympathetic, because the readers would understand that post-traumatic stress disorder had him revisiting a battlefield in his nightmares. If he’d merely been hungover, the readers would be less understanding. In the example from Liz Fielding’s *The Billionaire Takes a Bride* (pages 85-86), Ginny is sympathetic because, even though she’s trespassing and possibly intending to burglarize, she’s obviously not a career criminal—so the readers assume she must have a good reason for her actions, and they’re willing to read on to find out what it is.

It doesn’t take a lot of positives to make the readers like the main characters. But if the first presentation is entirely negative, they may not read far enough to discover what wonderful people the characters really are. In Nicola Cornick’s *The Rake’s Bride*, the heroine is marrying a man for his money, plain and simple—not the most heroic behavior. But the fact that she feels guilty about it is enough to make the readers go on to find out more:

“Pray stop at once!” Thea said, more sharply than she had intended. To hear her sister itemize the material benefits of the match made her feel intolerably guilty, for she was marrying Bertie Pershore for his money and could scarcely deny it. She wished that it was not so; somehow she felt that Bertie deserved better than that she take advantage of him. Yet she was in desperate straits and he was chivalrous enough to come to her rescue.

Cornick is careful not to overdo the explanation here; she simply shows Thea feeling guilty, hints that she would like to find a way out of the marriage not for her own sake but for Bertie (another honorable touch), and then moves on with the story.

THE HERO AND HEROINE MEET

One of the most critically important moments in the first section of your book is the first meeting of the hero and heroine. This moment may be the first time the two of them lay eyes on each other. Or it may be their first meeting after a long separation, if they’ve had a previous relationship. Or they may see each other regularly, but this is the first meeting that is significant to the plot and conflict—the first encounter connected with the event that is going to change their lives.

This first meeting sets the stage for the interaction in the rest of the book. If

the readers don’t see it happening, they will feel cheated and left out, and won’t likely be involved enough with the characters to want to continue reading.

Yet many beginning writers tell about the first meeting, rather than show it as it happens. Or they include just a couple of lines of dialogue between hero and heroine, then jump to a scene hours later where the heroine is telling her best friend in five pages of dialogue how gorgeous the hero is. Or they have the hero think about how he reacted to

the heroine.

The importance of the first meeting cannot be emphasized too highly.

It should receive the amount of attention from the author—and therefore the readers—that it deserves.

Show the hero and heroine as they meet. What does the point-of-view character—let's say it's the heroine—notice about the hero? What makes him stand out? Some of that will be physical, like the color of his hair, but what makes him different might be the way other characters respond to him.

What do the main characters say? What do they do? How do they react to each other?

The very beginning is not a good place for the main characters to be experiencing overwhelming sexual attraction, but even if they think they don't like what they see, there will be an extra level of awareness between these characters—a sense that the other person is somehow very important.

In this example from the sweet traditional category romance *In the Arms of the Sheikh*, Sophie Weston shows us a few physical characteristics of the hero, along with reasons for both hero and heroine to be wary and suspicious:

The man emerged from the darkness between two huge bushes. He was not stealthy, but he walked lightly. He was tall, wearing something dark.

Natasha's first impression was that he was very professional. Professional what, she was not sure. ... Her second impression ... was total arrogance.

Natasha knew arrogance in all its forms. ... [0]nce, it had nearly cost her her life. She detested it. ... Her backbone locked and her chin came up like a fighter plane taking off.

The man looked at her. ... The reflected light from the porch picked up high, haughty cheekbones and eyes that pierced. Just for the moment she thought of a jungle cat, watchful and contained. And dangerous. ...

“Ms. Lambert to see Ms. Dare. ... Ms. Dare invited me for the weekend.”

He pretended to think about it—with insulting slowness. “That was the weekend that started last night? Or this morning at the latest?” ...

“I was held up. ... Look, what is this? I'm supposed to be spending the weekend with friends. Not giving a rundown of my recent diary to—to—” she looked at the height, the impassive face, the body impervious to cold, those eyes focused elsewhere, and the perfect insult leaped straight out of her childhood “—to Lurch the butler,” she finished with relish.

In addition to the introduction and physical picture, we get a hint of why the hero's arrogance will be more of a threat to this heroine than it might have been to another woman—one of the barriers this couple will have to overcome.

The first meeting should come early in the story. Though the hero and heroine aren't required to meet on the first page, a romance novel can't really get moving until they're together and interacting—so the first meeting should fall no later than at the end of the

first chapter. Many editors prefer both main characters to be on stage and together within the first few pages.

The shorter the romance novel is, the less room there is to develop the story, and therefore, the earlier the hero and heroine should meet. In short category romances (such as sweet传统als and short contemporaries) and novellas, the hero and heroine often meet on page one. In single-title books and longer category romances (such as historicals, long contemporaries, and romantic suspense), the author usually develops a more complex story in parallel with the more involved romance. For this reason, the author can show more of one main character's life before the hero and heroine actually *meet*. Still, since the romance is the focus of the story, the couple's first meeting is too important to delay for long.

The first meeting might be only a few paragraphs—a couple could have a brief encounter and then move on, only to discover later that their problems will draw them back together. But it's more likely to fill an entire scene, with the couple's awareness and tension intermingled with a conversation about the troubles they're facing and why they have to deal with each other to make the problem go away.

First-Meet Cliches

In the thousands of romance novels that have been published, there are many similar first meetings. Some of them have been overused to the point that they've become cliches. Heroes and heroines who meet when their cars collide, or when she smacks into the hard wall of his body, or when she falls off a ladder/wall/step stool/tree and he catches her, or when one of them walks in when the other's wearing only a towel, are among the first-meet scenarios that now make editors flinch and roll their eyes. Unless you can come up with a creative new twist on one of those ideas, it's wiser to find a different route to the hero and heroine's first encounter.

IN REVIEW: Looking at Beginnings



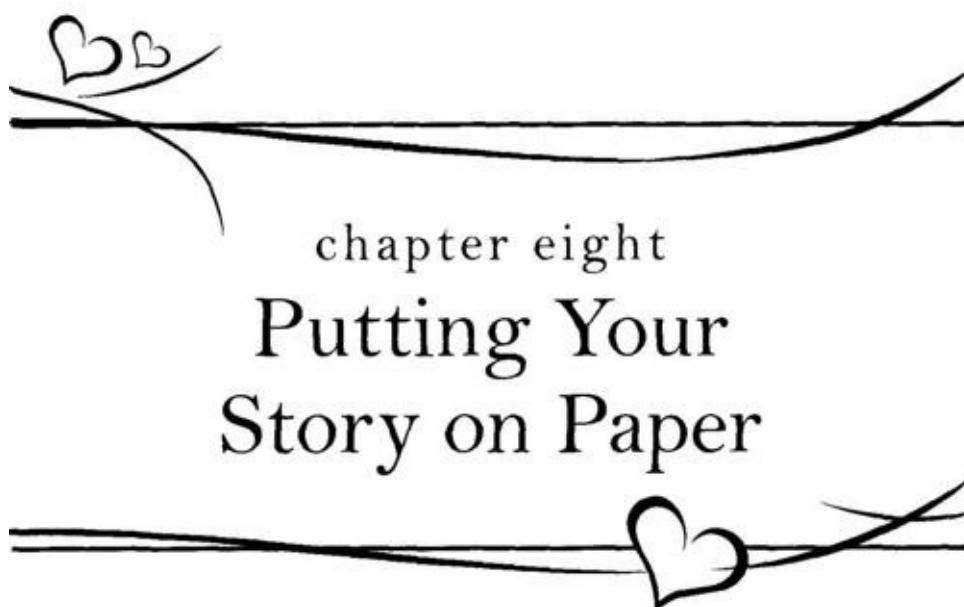
1. Reread the first half-dozen pages of the romance novels you've been studying. In each book, which characters have you met? Have you met the hero, the heroine, or both?
2. What do you know about the main characters you've met? What don't you know?
3. What do you want to know *about* the main characters?
4. How did the author catch your attention? Did she start her story with action or with description? With ordinary life or a change in the main character's circumstances? With an unusual statement or line?
5. If the hero and heroine have met, what was their first reaction to each other?

Creating Your Beginning



1. Where does the action of your story start?
2. What event goes on page one of your story?

3. Does your story start with the heroine, the hero, or both of them together?
4. How do your heroine and hero meet for the first time? 5. How do they react to each other?
6. What does your viewpoint character notice about the other main character? 7. How does the initial problem—the conflict between the characters—come to the attention of the readers?



chapter eight

Putting Your Story on Paper

Starting to write a story is fun. The author who's been thinking for a while about his *characters often has the first scene clearly* developed in his mind. He knows exactly what happens, exactly who says what, exactly how everybody looks and what each of them does—and so the first part of the story may flow easily onto the page.

But what comes after that first scene often isn't as clear or as easy to write. That's why a lot of writers hit a wall about the time they finish writing the first chapter: They're not sure what comes next, or how to put the events down on paper in a way the readers will appreciate.

Even writers who have done a full outline sometimes encounter this problem. Having the main events of the story in mind is one thing; actually putting those events down on the page is another.

But there are some specific techniques you may find helpful in telling a story. Among them are story-showing (which is different from storytelling); choosing the specific details to create the exact picture you want to form in the readers' minds; and using narrative, flashback, exposition, and summary to effectively share those carefully chosen details with your readers.

These techniques will help you get your story out of your head and onto the paper as you create the individual scenes and chapters that are the building blocks of your book.

STORY-SHOWING, STORYTELLING

The goal of writing a story is to make the readers feel like they're right there, sitting quietly in a corner as the action unfolds—watching, listening, smelling, touching, and

lasting right along with the characters. When the readers feel like they're part of the story, they become so involved that they can't put the book down. You can create this feeling in your readers by using a technique known as *story-showing*. I say *showing*, rather than *telling*, quite deliberately.

Storytelling gives the readers a summary of the events and action and tells them about the characters, as in this made-up example based on Lynn Michaels's single title *Mother of the Bride*—.

Cydney had had a rotten day, and the last straw was when her client made a pass.

But what makes a day rotten? Exactly what sort of behavior is involved in making a pass? Without having the details so they can judge for themselves, the readers may be skeptical of the author's definition of *rotten*.

Story-showing, on the other hand, gives the readers a word picture of the scene and allows them to draw their own conclusions about the characters and the action. Here's the real passage from *Mother of the Bride*, *showing* Cydney's rot-ten day and the client making a pass:

Thirty-two was too young for spider veins.

It was also too young to be hit on by Wendell Pickering, art director of *Bloom and Bulb* magazine, a lanky man with thinning hair and pale eyes. He made the pass once he finished nitpicking the six-page spread on perennial borders Cydney had stayed up until 3 a.m. to finish.

"I'm afraid I can't approve this," he said. "I might be able to over dinner this evening if you think you can make the corrections by seven-thirty."

Then he smiled and laid his hand on her tush.

It was now 2:30 in the afternoon. Cydney had a parking ticket in her purse, a headache and no Tylenol, a notebook computer with a blown graphics card that thought it was an Etch a Sketch, a roll of film a client had accidentally exposed and would have to be reshot, a broken heel on her best pumps, and now a man with a neck like a chicken who actually thought she'd go out with him to salvage a \$2,500 photo layout.

"I'm busy tonight, Wendell," Cydney said in her iciest voice. Sticking my head in the oven, she thought. "Now take your hands off me while you still can."

By giving the details of Cydney's day and showing Wendell right down to his hand on Cydney's rear, Michaels has given the readers all the evidence they need to form their own conclusion. She's also presented Cydney in a positive light—appropriately assertive but not nasty, even though Wendell deserves it.

Summarizing—telling—is an occupational hazard for every novelist. Because you, as the author, can so clearly see the action, hear the words, and smell the scents of the story as you're writing it, it's sometimes easy to forget that the readers don't automatically have the same grasp of the scene.

The readers can only see, hear, and smell the things you put in front of them, and unless

you give them the details that will help them experience those sensations, they can't possibly react the same way you do to the story.

Showing the story means giving the readers the same kinds of information they would get if they were sitting in a theater watching a play. In a theater, you don't get ultrafine detail, but you get the big picture that helps you make up your own mind about the setting. You see the characters' actions, props, and costumes, so you can draw your own conclusions about the kind of people they are.

A stage play doesn't give you all the details, just the ones you need in order to understand what's going on and to form a background for the story. You aren't told what the main character ate for breakfast, unless perhaps he's going to suspect in act 2 that his corn flakes were poisoned. You don't see what's beyond the doorways at the edge of the stage; you know there are rooms there, but you don't need the details.

In the same way, you don't need to give your readers every detail of your characters' lives and actions. Skip over the less important details and concentrate on the facts that help the readers picture the scene. If your heroine is driving to work, you don't need to describe every gear change or list every intersection. You might, however, note the fact that the heavy traffic frays her nerves, or comment that she's already so stressed by the hero that she doesn't even notice the traffic—because those things tell the readers important things about the heroine.

SELECTING DETAILS

Details are most effective when they build on what the readers already know. If the setting is a living room, the readers don't need to see a dozen other rooms in order to assume the one in front of them is attached to a regular house. On the other hand, if the setting is another planet, the readers will need considerably more information in order to form a mental picture.

The tricky part of including detail is sorting out the significant details from the mass of information inside your mind. As you write a scene, you know what everyone looks like, what they're wearing, and what color the upholstery is. Most of that information isn't critically important because the readers know about people and clothes and furnishings and can provide that picture for themselves. Yet it's important to give the readers enough information to be able to picture *your* room and *your* character.

How many details do you need to give, and which ones are important to help the readers form a picture in their minds? You can determine this by considering the following questions:

- How familiar are the readers with this type of location, person, or event? (The *more* commonplace the location, person, or event, the fewer descriptive details the readers need to form a picture.)
- What makes this place, these people, or this event different from the ordinary? What makes them stand out from similar places, people, or events?
- What do the readers need to know in order to understand why these characters react

as they do?

Think about what you as a reader would like to know about this story, these characters, and this situation. What do you need to know in order to understand what's going on? Then share those facts—and no more—with your audience. Let the readers have the fun of imagining the rest.

And when you want to describe a room or a person, give your point-of-view character a reason to stop and take a good look. Is this the first time he's ever been in this location or seen this person? Is the room different from what he expected? Has the character he's looking at changed since he last saw him?

In her paranormal single title *Undead and Unwed*, MaryJanice Davidson shows us her heroine, a brand-new vampire, as she begins to realize what's happened to her:

I opened my eyes to pure darkness. When I was a kid I read a short story about a preacher who went to hell, and when he got there he discovered the dead didn't have eyelids, so they couldn't close their eyes to block out the horror. Right away I knew I wasn't in hell, since I couldn't see a thing.

I wriggled experimentally. I was in a small, closed space. I was lying on something hard, but the sides of my little cage were padded. ...

I wriggled some more, then had a brainstorm and sat up. My head banged into something firm but yielding, which gave way when I shoved. Then I was sitting up, blinking in the gloom. ...

Then I realized I was sitting in a coffin. ...

I nearly broke something scrambling out. ... I burst through the swinging doors and found myself in a large, wood-paneled entryway. ... At the far end of the entry was a tall, wild-eyed blonde dressed in an absurd pink suit. She might have been pretty if she wasn't wearing orange blusher and too much blue eye shadow. ...

The blonde wobbled toward me on cheap shoes—Payless, buy one pair get the second at half price—and I saw her hair was actually quite nice: shoulder length with a cute flip at the ends and interesting streaky highlights.

Interesting Shade #23 Lush Golden Blonde highlights. Heyyyyy ... The woman in the awful suit was me. The woman in the cheap *shoes* was me! I staggered closer to the mirror, wide eyed. Yes, it was really me, and yes, I looked this awful. I really was in hell!

Davidson's heroine has a great reason for looking around carefully and noting details, since her surroundings are like nothing she's ever experienced. And although the author employs an overused device—the heroine catching sight of herself in a mirror—as an excuse to describe her, Davidson has added some wicked twists. Her heroine literally being caught dead in a suit, shoes, and makeup that she would normally never have worn makes the cliche fresh and new.

SHARING DETAILS

How do you share the details of your all-important story with the readers? There are

five main ways:

1. **Narrative:** describing what happens in more-or-less sequential order.
2. **Exposition and Summary:** telling about or recapping the action rather than showing it.
3. **Flashback:** showing a character reliving an event that happened before the current story.
4. **Introspection:** detailing what the characters think.
5. **Dialogue:** sharing what the characters say.

We'll look at dialogue and introspection in chapter twelve, but let's take a closer *look at narrative, exposition and summary, and flashback techniques*.

Narrative

Straightforward narrative involves presenting events to the readers in the same order in which they occurred. In its simplest form, narrative is almost a list. Narrative is what the Red King from *Alice in Wonderland* wanted when he said, "Begin at the beginning, go on till you come to the end, and then stop." It's the technique a first-grader uses to tell you what he did at the zoo: "First I saw the giraffes, then I rode on the elephant, and then I petted a goat and he tried to eat my sleeve."

The action is much more complex in romantic fiction, of course, but the principle for presenting it is the same. Close your eyes and watch the scene in your mind as it unfolds. What happens next? What do your readers need to know in order to understand the scene? What details will help them picture the location, characters, and events?

Have you ever struggled to make sense of a story told by a scatterbrained individual who started the tale in the middle, left out the most important facts, forgot the punch line, and kept saying, "Oh, I forgot to tell you ..." or "I guess I should have said ..."?

If so, you appreciate the value of straightforward narrative—simple words, simple (though varied) sentence structures, and events coming one after another

in the same sequence in which they actually occurred. Using simple words and uncomplicated sentence structure does not make a story dull. In fact, straightforward writing is more difficult to compose well than more complex and literary flights of fancy because every word counts. Writing so the story will be easy for the readers to comprehend is not a simple task.

Everything in Order

When you're writing, keep in mind the order in which things actually happen, and follow that order. Tell the readers that someone new has come into the room before the new character starts talking. Show the event and then the reaction. It's far easier for the readers to follow and enjoy action when they see it happening in real time and in order.

Don't let your point-of-view character react before you tell the readers what she's reacting to—as I've done in this example:

Jane's stomach jolted. She couldn't believe what he'd just said. Had she really heard him say that Edward had married Helen?

Notice that I've put Jane's gut reaction first, then a more reasoned reaction, and then finally the comment that caused the reaction. The result will probably make the readers go back and read the paragraph over again to figure out what happened when.

But when you share events in the order in which they happen, the readers are right there watching, as in this example from Susan Elizabeth Phillips' *First Lady*, when her hero, Mat, is driving Lucy and her baby sister to a lab for blood tests to prove he's not their father:

After a couple of tries, the engine sputtered to life. [Mat] shook his head in disgust.

"This thing is a piece of crap." ... He glanced into [the Winnebago's] side mirror and backed out. "You know, don't you, that I'm not really your father."

"Like I'd want you."

So much for the worry he'd been harboring that [Lucy] might have built up some kind of sentimental fantasy about him. ... "Here are the facts, smart mouth. Your mother put my name on both your birth certificates, so we need to straighten that out, and the only way we can do it is with three blood tests." ...

They drove the rest of the way to the lab in silence, except for the Demon Baby, who'd started to scream again. He pulled up in front of a two-story medical building and looked over at Lucy. She was staring rigidly at the doors as if she were looking at the gates of hell.

"I'll give you twenty bucks to take the test," he said quickly.

She shook her head. "No needles. I hate needles. Even thinking about them makes me sick."

He was just beginning to contemplate how he could carry two screaming children into the lab when he had his first piece of luck all day.

Lucy got out of the Winnebago before she threw up.

Phillips gives us enough details to picture the scene as it's unfolding, and it's important to note what she doesn't tell us: how many miles it is to the lab; how many red lights they stop for; how many dents the Winnebago has; whether the lab building is brick, frame, or stone. Instead, she focuses on the events that are important at this point in the story: Mat starts up the mobile home with difficulty, drives to the lab, and parks; Lucy gets out and throws up. Showing the sequence of events in neat chronological order actually builds suspense, because during the drive to the lab, our suspicions are growing that this can't possibly go as smoothly as Mat hopes it will.

Narrating the events in order automatically limits the amount of information the readers get. When you're telling about events and people, it's easy to tell too much. But when the readers see and hear what's going on for themselves, they have some limitations—and they become more involved with the story as they try to figure out what's going on.

Exposition and Summary

Story-showing has limits. Not every event is important enough to be worth the time and space required in order to show every instant of the action. Not every movement or thought is crucial to the readers' comprehension. Many episodes can be made clearer with a single summing-up sentence than with pages of descriptive detail. Summary and exposition are the tools you use when you need to let readers know something but using story-showing details would only slow things down.

Summary is a concise statement of facts or the order of events; it's straight telling, without using dialogue or action. Summary is "just the facts, ma'am."

Exposition is summary with a twist—it tells what happened, but it also explains why. Exposition doesn't simply show the action and allow readers to make their own judgments; it tells the readers what to think.

The single sentence "Sara hadn't seen Max in years" is a summary—it simply and efficiently states a fact that readers need to know. This simple sentence is much clearer than a paragraph or two giving the details of Sara's confusion and happiness and memories at the encounter. And especially if Max isn't critically important in Sara's life or her story, the space you save by summarizing could be better used for other things.

Exposition is a little more problematic. If your heroine is chatting with an old friend and you break off the conversation to say, "Sally met Jane when they were in kindergarten and Jane had been her best friend ever since," you're using exposition—you're telling readers rather than letting them discover for themselves.

Whether readers need or want to know that these two characters have been friends for twenty years is another question altogether, and that's where the use of exposition becomes clouded. Is it better to tell, or is it better to show Sally and Jane reminiscing about their school days? The answer will depend on the story. If what happened in kindergarten is important in Sally's current story, perhaps you need to show it through dialogue or even flashback. If it isn't, the single line of exposition is preferable—if you need to explain anything at all.

In Tanya Michaels's romantic comedy *The Maid of Dishonor*, the heroine is attending a cocktail party, but the conversation isn't important to the story—so Michaels wisely opts for two paragraphs of summary instead of giving all the details:

Wide French doors opened onto a well-manicured lawn, and Sam hurried through them, anxious to escape the cloying, suffocating atmosphere of the room. Each conversation opener she'd heard tonight had been a blatant status announcement. Why didn't the guests just lay their bank statements and family trees out on the enormous mahogany dining table and give up the pretense of small talk?

Thank God this is not the life I lead. Despite the condescending gazes she'd drawn when she told people she was a piano teacher, she'd never trade her job to be one of the wealthy elite inside...

By summing up the unimportant talk, Michaels quickly moves her heroine out to the

terrace where the next important event will take place.

When Not to Use Summary and Exposition

If you introduce your main character by saying “Sally Jones, who was the personal assistant to a powerful businessman, answered the phone,” you’re telling the readers about Sally, her boss, and the office, rather than letting the readers find out for themselves. You’re cheating the readers out of a chance to see Sally in action.

If you stop in the middle of your main characters’ quarrel to explain why they’ve never been able to get along, you’re taking away from the readers the joy of figuring that out for themselves.

Sometimes, especially when a passage of this sort goes on for a while, it’s referred to as an information dump—as if the author has upended a basketful of facts over the reader’s head.

When to Use Summary and Exposition

As we saw in the storytelling and story-showing examples at the beginning of the chapter, giving all the details so readers can make up their own minds takes a great deal more space. If the action isn’t concise and fast moving, or if it isn’t particularly important, summary may be the best way to handle it. If all you’re doing is moving your heroine across country, you probably don’t need to detail every

stop sign and road change. It’s better to write, “The journey seemed to take forever, and the endless parade of gas stations meshed into a blur in her memory,” and let it go at that.

Summary and exposition can be very useful to set the stage, giving the details necessary for readers to create a picture in their minds. “In matching fireplaces at each end of the room, gas logs flickered, banishing the gloom of a rainy afternoon,” gives the information succinctly. You could have the main characters chat about the fires and the weather instead, but it would take up half a page and not add much to the story.

Even in a long novel, your space—your number of words—is limited. Use them for showing the important things, and let the readers fill in the rest from their experience and imagination.

Flashbacks

Sometimes, especially when a story takes place over a period of years or has its origins in a long-ago event, flashbacks are a useful story-showing tool.

A flashback is a scene that takes a character back in time to an event, so the character actually relives what happened. The readers see the scene from the character’s point of view at the time, and they hear the actual words spoken, not the character’s recollection of what was said. The scene takes place just as it would if it were a present-day event; it’s not just a memory.

Flashback is most often used in romance stories in which the hero and heroine have had an earlier relationship. The flashbacks show significant bits of their past interaction so the

readers can see these important events for themselves and understand why the characters are still reacting to those events today.

Since a flashback presents events as they actually happened, it uses straightforward narrative. Because flashback scenes are usually relayed just like a scene from the present action, readers sometimes find it difficult to tell when they've entered a flashback. You can use a number of techniques to help make the transition clear to the readers.

- **Warn the readers of what's coming.** Make sure they know they're about to enter a flashback. You can do this by using past perfect tense during the shift from the current story to the flashback. During the rest of the flashback scene, use the simple past tense, returning briefly to past perfect to finish the flashback. In many cases, a sentence or two of summary at the beginning and end of the flashback are necessary to set the scene and establish place and time. (If the main part of the story is being told in present tense, then the body of the flashback also will use present tense. You can signal the start of a flashback in this case by using past tense.)

- **Create a logical transition from present to past.** Memories don't come out of nowhere. What brought the past event to mind? What's making the character think about it right now?

- **Place the flashback in a plausible spot in the story.** Does the character have time for the luxury of memory? While the heroine's being chased down the street by the bad guys, she's not likely to be reconsidering her life. If she's holed up in a closet, holding her breath and hoping they'll overlook her, she might.

- **Don't use flashbacks early in the book.** Never start a story with a flashback. Get the present-day story well established first. By focusing on the main story, you'll build sympathy for your characters and reader interest about what happened in their pasts. If you've done a good job of making your characters sympathetic by the time you take your readers on that journey into the past, they'll be happy to accompany you.

- **Break large flashbacks into smaller portions.** If your story has a great deal of important past action, it's a good idea to feed it to your readers in small chunks, returning to the present at intervals—even if only for a few paragraphs—in order to reestablish the main story.

- **Finish a flashback by returning your readers to where (and when) they were before the flashback started.** This helps make it apparent that the side trip is now finished and the readers are once again on the main path.

In one of my books, *Promise Me Tomorrow*, the hero and heroine have a vast amount of shared history, including an unplanned pregnancy, a marriage of convenience, a miscarriage, and a divorce. All of that is important because it affects what happens to them in the present-day story; the readers need to see the events and be allowed to judge for themselves what happened, rather than seeing things as interpreted much later by the now more mature characters.

To put all that powerful history into a single flashback would overwhelm any story, no

matter how carefully the flashback was handled. I split the past events into a half-dozen segments scattered throughout chapters two, three, and four—almost the entire first half of the book—and as a result, the flashbacks became a powerful secondary narrative, almost a subplot.

One of these flashback episodes is introduced when the heroine, shortly after encountering the hero for the first time in several years, is alone in her bedroom:

There was a shadow on the lawn of the sorority house. A dog? A trick of the moonlight, perhaps? Or a prowler, stalking the house? One of the sororities up the street had reported a peeping Tom, a couple of weeks ago.

Cassidy watched the shadow for long minutes, until she was certain that no human being could have stayed still for so long.

Then, with a sigh, she turned away from the window. Don't be a fool, she told herself. You know perfectly well there's nothing out there. But you'd rather face the bogeyman in the dark than your own memories, tonight.

The flashback begins, using past perfect tense (*had been, had had*) to indicate a time long past, then sliding into past tense (*was, said*) as summary gives way to action:

Reid had been as good as his word that night; it had been almost midnight when her work was done, and he had still been sitting patiently in the booth, drinking coffee, idly turning the pages of the morning's newspaper. She had had a couple of hours to think it over, and so when she came back to the booth for the last time she was considerably calmer. Perhaps Kent's family had a right to know what she had decided. In any case, it seemed, it was no longer her choice whether to tell them; the man in that booth was a force to be reckoned with.

“I've clocked out,” she said. “I'm finished for the night.”

The body of the flashback is in real-time narrative and past tense, allowing the readers to watch the characters interact:

“You might as well tell me what you want, Cassidy.”

She thought bitterly, *You'll never believe it—but why not tell you?* “A good home for my baby,” she said. “That's all. So I'm giving him up for adoption, and you can just run along and not worry about it any more,” She started to slide out of the booth.

He said, impassively, “That makes things much easier.”

Cassidy stopped. “What on earth do you mean?”

He didn't answer. “When is the baby due?”

“Why do you care?” But she couldn't hold out against that cool stare. “The middle of December.”

“December,” he repeated thoughtfully. “Have you talked to an agency yet?”

As the flashback draws to a conclusion a few pages later, I shift to past perfect tense to

indicate to the readers that the flashback is ending:

She swore to herself that she would take his help only as long as she must, that she would regard it as a loan, and that someday she would pay every penny back, because to do anything else was to put a price tag on her baby.

She did it, too, as far as she was able. Last May, she had finally finished at the university, and on the first day of June, when the annual check was deposited, she closed the account. She took every remaining cent of Reid Cavanaugh's money to Chicago with her when she went to a news reporters' convention, and she bought the first of

that series of money orders. And every month thereafter she would send a little more, until she had paid back the part of his money she had spent.

Then I return the readers to the present-day story by using word clues and references to the scene as it was before the flashback started. This clearly tells the readers that they're back to the main story, and back in the present:

The moon was high now, in the wee hours of the morning, and the shadow out on the lawn of the sorority house stayed solidly in place.

What Flashbacks Can't Do for Your Story

Flashbacks should be used only if the past action illustrates the motivation for the main conflict and if it is necessary for the readers to see that action actually occurring in order to understand the present-day story.

Before you commit to using flashbacks, keep in mind that they seldom move a story forward. In fact, they slow the action of the main story and can even bring it to a dead halt—from which it may never recover. They also do not work well to develop a character. If your intent is simply to insert the character's history, a summary may be more effective. You could also relate the necessary history through dialogue with another character, a technique that allows you to include a later and more mature interpretation of the events.

SETTING AND BACKGROUND DETAILS

Choosing the right details—and using enough, but not too many, of them—is particularly important when it comes to conveying the setting and background of your story. *Setting* is the location of the story; *background* is the jobs, hobbies, social structure, etc., that add texture to the story.

The romances I read when I was a kid were set in places like the south of France, a hacienda in Mexico, a cruise ship, or a sheikh's tent in the desert. It seemed that an exotic location was a necessary part of the romance genre—quite a hurdle for an Iowa girl, raised on a farm, who'd never seen an ocean.

But my desire to write romance outweighed my common sense, so I plunged in anyway and hoped that by the time my work was good enough to sell, I'd be able to go someplace glamorous, or the publishers would have changed the rules.

As a matter of fact, both of those things happened. But the more important change was the alteration in the definition of *exotic location*. Now, romances don't need to be set in

glitzy, glamorous sites. Anything that is new to the readers can be considered exotic.

However, some settings are more popular than others. Ranches in the American West, both historical and contemporary, are perennial favorites, as is the Australian outback. Greece and Italy are popular settings with some categories

(especially Harlequin Presents), while others favor small to mid-size American cities (especially Harlequin American Romance).

Cruise ships and resorts are not big sellers, though nobody seems to know why. Media backgrounds—stories set at newspapers or magazine offices, or featuring war correspondents, news anchors, or television hosts—are not well received. Movie sets, sports stadiums, and symphony orchestras are also less successful as backgrounds, perhaps because it's difficult to evoke a celebrity character so realistically that the readers can suspend disbelief.

Certain geographical areas—especially Africa, the Balkans, and Southeast Asia—are not popular with readers. There seem to be two reasons for this: Cultural unfamiliarity makes it more difficult for the readers to identify, and perceived political instability threatens the readers' conviction that the couple can achieve a truly happy, peaceful ending. The stereotype may be unfair, but the prejudice is a fact.

Like everything in romance, there are exceptions. Single-title romances are more flexible than category romances and can take up unusual settings and backgrounds; there are many more celebrities, sports stars, and reporters in single-title than in category romance. Still, stories that buck the trends must be very strong in order to overcome the initial resistance to the background. So if you think you want to write a story about an actor falling in love with a reporter while filming a movie on a cruise ship headed to South Africa, you might want to think again.

Why Does Setting Matter?

Setting is important because it adds depth and texture to your love story. Perhaps it's not a romantic place at all, but one that is made romantic only by circumstances. It might be foreign to the readers, so they can feel like they're traveling with the heroine, or it might be familiar, giving the readers a sense of comfort and informality. In any case, setting functions as a backdrop, not as a major portion of the story. You're writing a romance, not a travelogue.

Details about the setting are best presented as they relate to the character, as in this example from Debbie Macomber's single title *Thursdays at Eight*:

It was barely November, and already Christmas decorations were up. Clare pulled into the strip mall where Mocha Moments was located, noting that Liz Kenyon's Seville was parked out front. Knowing her friend, Clare suspected Liz had ordered her croissant and coffee, and had their window table secured.

The air was cool and damp this morning, with a breeze coming in from the Pacific, but Clare didn't mind. The Santa Ana winds had dried out the valley these past few months, and the moisture was a refreshing change.

We know quite a bit about the restaurant, the time of year, and the geographical area from this brief selection, even though Macomber has used just a few setting details. Because she's chosen details that evoke the senses—like the cool, damp breeze—we can feel as well as see the coffee shop where the characters are meeting.

More Than Just a Place

Setting is more than geographical location—it's the background against which the story takes place. Background includes the main characters' jobs and their lifestyles. However, the background must not be allowed to outweigh the story. If your heroine's job is so exotic or so far outside your readers' experience that you can't explain it in a couple of sentences, perhaps you should modify the job rather than risk making the romance secondary to the background. If your fictional society is so complex that you're spending more pages describing it than telling the readers what the characters are up to, perhaps it's time to rethink the setting. If the heroine's hobby is more interesting to you than her romance, then the hobby may be too prominent in the story.

Looking again at *Thursdays at Eight*, you can see how Macomber gives a quick, clear picture of her main character's job:

Liz stared at the phone on her desk, dreading its ring. Her Monday had begun badly, and already she could see that this first week of the new year was going to be a repeat of December, with many of the same problems she'd faced then. The hospital was no closer to a new contract with the nurses' union, and the state health inspectors were scheduled for Wednesday afternoon.

Without going into loads of detail, Macomber makes it clear that Liz is a hospital executive, not a health-care worker, and gives us enough detail to understand why Liz would be frustrated with her job just now. Since Liz's job isn't the story, that's all we need to know.

USING WHAT'S REAL

One way to increase the sense of reality in your stories is to refer to real movies, songs, dances, fashions, people, and products. But this kind of verisimilitude comes with a downside: Hit movies and dances will look very tired in a few years. (Remember the Macarena?) Quoting from current songs means getting permission from the musicians' organizations, something that is not easy to do. Hairstyles change from year to year, and designers wax and wane in popularity, so being too specific about your hero's haircut or your heroine's dress style may rapidly date your story.

Real people have a habit of changing. Celebrity couples break up. People grow old, get arrested for possession of drugs, or die before their time—and if you've referred to them in your book as young, vivacious role models, you've made your contemporary romance into a historical without even trying.

Real products also change over time and can date your story. Packaging and slogans seldom stay static for long. If you choose to refer to real products, use the trademarked names correctly (e.g., Coca-Cola or Coke, *not coke*). And if you want to refer to a product

in a negative sense, it's safer to make up a name than to refer to a real product and risk irritating the corporation's attorneys.

SCENES AND CHAPTERS

Writing a book doesn't look like such an overwhelming project if you think of the task in terms of constructing the individual scenes that make up the story—each *one just a few pages in length*.

Scenes

A scene is a single unit of real time, including action by the characters. Something happens, and the readers see it happen. Each scene has a definite beginning and ending, and it consists of a sequence of consecutive events. It may include reflection or flashback, but if there is a lapse in time between story events, the author usually ends the scene and starts another.

With rare exceptions, each scene should have one—and only one—well-defined point of view (we'll discuss point of view in greater detail in chapter eleven).

Every scene must have at least one major purpose or goal, and preferably several minor purposes as well. If you can't state what the purpose of the scene is, it may be merely occupying space instead of advancing the plot. Each scene should be an essential part of the story, furthering the relationship between the main characters. If cutting a scene wouldn't seriously wound the book, then it shouldn't be there in the first place.

Scenes differ in length according to their relative importance in the story. A scene may be no more than a single page long; a chapter may contain several such short scenes. But a scene may also be so important that it fills an entire chapter. It might even carry over from one chapter to the next, breaking for a chapter end at an exciting or dramatic point and then picking up at the start of the next chapter, perhaps from a different point of view.

The break from one scene to another within a chapter is marked typographically by an extra blank line—a white space that alerts readers to expect a change in time, place, or point of view. (Adding a few crosshatches or asterisks to the blank line ensures that it will not be overlooked in editing or typesetting.)

Chapters

In many kinds of fiction, each scene is simply assigned a number, and no matter how long or short, the scene functions as a chapter. The book might have dozens of chapters, some a page or two long and some running to fifteen or twenty pages.

In category romance, the rules tend to be a little more rigid, with the book divided into roughly equal chapters, each of which contains one or more scenes. The average length of a chapter in category *romance* is 5,000 words, though that's not a rule.

The number of chapters varies according to the romance category, and some are more definite in their guidelines than others. Typically, a short romance will have ten to twelve chapters, while long contemporaries might have seventeen to twenty, and historicals might have twenty-five or more. Single-title and mainstream romance novels, like general

fiction, vary widely in the number and length of their chapters.

While each scene is a well-defined unit of time, location, and point of view, a chapter can be much more expansive. A single chapter that includes several scenes might cover a span of days or even months.

The chapter is a convenient, if somewhat artificial, unit of storytelling. Each chapter is another step in the characters' upward climb, another section of the story. Unlike nonfiction, in which chapters are neatly constructed packages and each is independent of the others, in fiction each chapter ends with another twist in the plot, leading into the next chapter and making it difficult for readers to put the book down. In romance, that chapter-ending twist usually relates to both main characters.

Important Action

All of the important action in a story should be shown directly to the readers through scenes, either as it occurs or through the characters' later discussion or reflection. Crucial events should not happen in the white space—the time that passes between the book's scenes (so called because of the literally blank or white line that indicates the scene change).

Important action should not be summarized. Many writers come up to a moment of high drama and then dodge it, writing something like, “Later, when things had settled down. . . .” It’s usually far better to show crucial action as it happens, moment by moment.

Conflict is uncomfortable for most people to observe and to write, but the hard-to-write, action-filled, uncomfortable moments are the memorable ones that make the readers feel they’re really there.

Structure

Though scenes and chapters aren’t equivalent, they have certain things in common, like the need for an attention-catching beginning and an intriguing end.

The start of each scene and chapter is a mini version of the beginning of the book. With each new segment of the story, you must once more set the stage and get rapidly into the action. The best start for a scene focuses on emotion or character rather than description.

It’s generally better to start a scene with action rather than summarize what’s happened in the white space between scenes. So if you’re going to show Jason at work, it’s better to start with him doing something:

Jason set his coffee on the desk and pulled his chair around so he could reach the top envelope *in his* overflowing in-basket.

It’s much less effective to simply tell the readers all about what’s happened to Jason since they left him in the last scene:

After taking some time off during Christmas break, Jason had spent the last two weeks trying to catch up on his work. He’d spent day after day digging through the piles of paperwork, skipping lunches every day except one, when he’d seen Angela for the only time since Christmas. But despite all his efforts, his in-basket was still overflowing when

he came to work on that Tuesday.

Starting the Scene

The first paragraph or two of each scene must accomplish several things:

- Establish the time and place where the scene occurs.
- Clearly identify the viewpoint character.
- Hint at the mood of the scene.
- Capture the readers' attention and not allow them to put the book down.

Start your scenes and chapters with action. Don't summarize what's happened since the last scene, and don't begin the scene with the heroine parking her car in the company lot if the action doesn't get going until she walks into the conference room at mid-morning.

In the start of this short scene from Jackie Braun's sweet traditional category romance *In the Shelter of His Arms*, we see the homeless heroine after she's broken into her boss's bar through a restroom window in order to spend the night where it's warm:

Morning came before Roz was ready for it, but then she was used to running on only a few hours of sleep. She'd bunked on the floor of a small storeroom off the kitchen, using her duffel bag as a pillow. Now, with sunlight slinking through the window, she realized the room also doubled as Mason's office. ... Her stomach growled, reminding her that it hadn't forgotten it was empty.

In just a few words, Braun has told us the place and time of the new scene, as well as how much time has passed since the previous scene. She's also made clear the main problem of this short scene—Roz is hungry—and she's set up the next difficulty for her character, as we'll see when we read the end of this scene below.

Ending the Scene

The last paragraph or two of each scene should intrigue the readers into turning the page and going on to the next one. To do that, you can use one or more of the following techniques:

- End a scene with an intriguing twist. Reaching the end of a scene is like pushing the pause button on a DVD player—if you pause at a boring moment, the viewer may be sidetracked by another activity and not come back to watch the rest of the show. The best example of how not to end a scene or a chapter is with the heroine drifting cozily off to sleep without a care in the world.
- End your scenes and chapters when the action ends. If the hero walks out of the heroine's store, that's probably the end of the action—so don't have her turning to greet the next customer unless that customer has something important to add.
- End with a surprise event or announcement. Perhaps the character has made a decision about future action, leaving the readers wondering what the outcome will be.

- End with a question that the readers want answered.
- Stop in the middle of the action, or at a moment of tension, or with the character at risk.

You must play fair, however. If you end a scene with a hint of the action yet to come, you can't conveniently forget to carry through. If you ask a question, it has to be answered sometime during the story. If you opt for a surprise, it has to be genuine and meaningful, not manufactured or coincidental.

Here's the end of that short scene from Jackie Braun's *In the Shelter of His Arms*.

The ham caught her eye and her mouth watered. Protein, and not in the form of a beer nut. She nearly wept.

She was cutting off a thick slab of the smoked meat when she heard the locks on the front door begin to rattle. Roz didn't wait around to wonder who it was. She stuffed the rest of the ham back in the fridge, tucked the bread and slice of meat she'd hacked off down the front of her shirt and hightailed it to the rest room. Through a crack, she watched Mason walk in, a pretty woman close behind him.

Quietly she closed the door and climbed atop the heat register. She was out the window and standing on the wooden palettes before she remembered her duffel bag was still in Mason's office.

Roz is busted—and it's a rare reader who doesn't turn the page to find out how long it takes Mason to realize that his new employee is a break-in artist, and to see what he's going to do about it.



IN REVIEW: Description, Setting, and Story Structure

1. Review the romances you've been reading. How does each author use details to show the story? How many details do you need to picture this setting in your mind?

2. Does the author use flashback? How did he handle the flashback? Were you able to follow the timing of the action?

3. Was the narrative easy to follow? Did the author use exposition and summary?

4. What settings and backgrounds has the author used? What kind of details, and how many details, did the author need to make you able to see and understand the setting and background?

5. How many chapters were there? How did the author begin and end scenes and chapters? Did you want to turn the page and go on to the next part of the story?

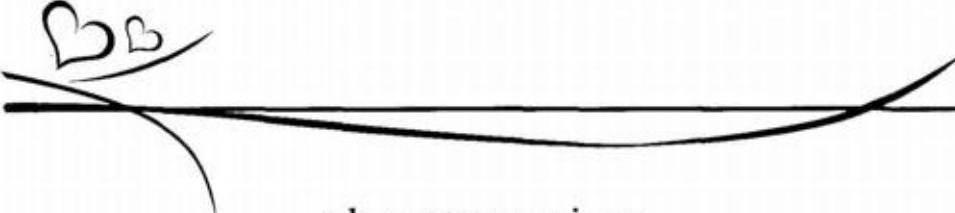
6. Did the author use past tense, present tense, or past perfect tense in telling the story?



Creating a Scene

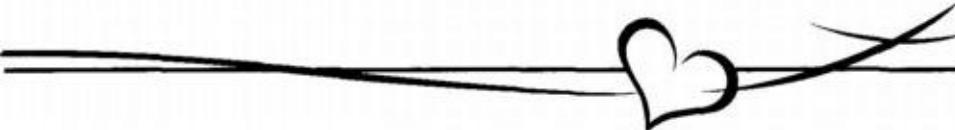
1. What is the primary purpose of this scene?

2. What else can I accomplish with this scene?
3. Which characters do I need to bring on stage?
4. Which characters don't I need?
5. Which characters are possible point-of-view characters?
6. What unit of time and place does this scene represent?
7. Why does the scene begin at the moment it does?
8. How can I best capture the readers' attention in the opening paragraph or two?
9. How can I establish time and place within the first few paragraphs?
10. What are the dozen events that could happen in this scene?
11. Can I use this scene to foreshadow future actions or events?
12. How can I use this scene to build suspense?
13. How does this scene lead into or set up the next or subsequent scenes?
14. How does the end of this scene draw the readers into the following scene?



chapter nine

Populating Your Romance Novel



By the time you actually start writing your book, you'll have already developed your hero and heroine, and they'll remain the most important characters throughout your entire story. But your main characters don't live in isolation. With few exceptions (such as a book in which the hero and heroine are marooned on a deserted island), your main characters will be surrounded by other people—families, friends, coworkers, authority figures, opponents, and enemies.

SECONDARY CHARACTERS

These people are the secondary characters in the book, and together they can act as a framework, a background, a contrast, and a sounding board for the main characters.

The limited length of many romance novels allows little time or space to fully develop secondary characters and subplots. Even in the longer books—historical romances and

long contemporary category romances, in which subplots and secondary characters are encouraged—it's important to keep the emphasis on the main romance, the main plot, and the central characters.

Because there are fewer restrictions on the personalities and behavior of secondary characters, they are often less difficult (and more fun) to write about. They can actually become more fascinating than the hero and heroine for the readers and for the writer.

This is especially true in sequels; characters who were previously at the heart of their own book appear in another character's story and sometimes want to take over. Beware of spending too much time bringing your readers up to date on recurring characters, because the readers who picked up that earlier book want to read *this* story.

Creating too many secondary characters—filling the landscape with friends and co-workers and neighbors—is a common problem for new writers. Every secondary character takes time and space and attention away from the hero and heroine. Before you create another character, think about those who already exist and ask yourself if one of them could take on an additional role. I sometimes think, “If this were a movie script, would this part be worth hiring an actor to play? Or would I assign the lines to someone I’ve already agreed to pay?”

If your heroine has two best friends, can you combine them into one? If she has four kids, do you really need them all, or can you show her as a mom with one or two?

Types of Secondary Characters

Romance novels don't have a standard cast of supporting characters. In many books, the heroine has a best friend in whom she can confide, but there's no requirement to construct such a character. There are some types of secondary characters that appear frequently, however. Each type offers potential for the story but can also detract from the main romance.

The Significant Third

A good many modern romances involve a very specific kind of secondary character, one who falls into a gray area between a main character and a secondary character. This significant third character is far more important than other secondary characters. Typically, this person is the cause of the conflict, or the reason for the story—she's central to the action. Because of this character's important role, there is generally only one significant third in a story.

The significant third character is most often the child of the hero or heroine, though she can be a parent, sibling, or friend who plays a very large part in the story. If the hero and heroine are together only because they've been named guardians to an orphaned six-year-old, the child is the significant third character. If the hero needs the heroine to provide care for his very sick father, and much of the story happens at the old man's bedside, the father is likely to be the significant third character. If the story is a psychological thriller in which the hero and heroine know exactly who's chasing them, the villain is often the significant third *character*.

It's a challenge to keep this character in her proper place—at the edge of the main story, not in the middle. It's easy to get careless and drift away from the main characters toward the significant third, particularly when this extra character is a child. We're almost programmed to put a child's needs before those of adults, and that carries through in odd ways when writing about a child. The result—anything from a textbook on child raising to a dictionary of baby talk—isn't a romance.

Many a romance novel has been destroyed by a significant third who became too important. The romance *must* remain firmly fixed on the two main characters.

Even if the most troublesome problem between them revolves around the significant third, it is the tension between the two main characters that is important.

In the first chapter of Penny McCusker's long contemporary *Noah and the Stork*, the significant third character appears just as the hero, Noah, and the heroine, Janey, are about to say good-bye after their first meeting in nearly a decade:

“I guess I should head out,” he said, but instead of leaving he had the audacity to step up to the fence and offer his hand.

Janey was going to take it, too. There was no way she'd back down from the challenge she saw in his eyes, no matter what it might cost her to actually put her hand in his. She took a step forward, then stopped short at the sound of her daughter's voice.

“Mom,” Jessie called, racketing out the front door and down the steps, jumping the last three as had become her habit. ... “Mrs. Devlin called. They're riding out to bring in the spring calves this weekend, and she asked if I want to go along. ...”

“Mom?” Noah said, his jaw dropping. Not that he couldn't see her as a mom; he couldn't think of anyone who loved children more or would be better at raising them than Janey. It was only that, in his mind, she was still seventeen, still carefree and single, not a grown woman with a kid eight or nine years old. ...

Jessie turned around then and Noah found himself looking into a pair of *green eyes*, the kind of green eyes he'd seen every morning of his life, staring back at him from his own mirror. ...

They stood that way for a moment, eyes locked, nerves strained, enough emotional baggage between them to make Sigmund Freud feel overworked.

The kid came to everyone's rescue. She glanced up at her mom, then confidently stepped out of the shelter of Janey's *arms*. She stopped halfway between the two adults, fixed Noah with a stare that was almost too direct to return, and said, “I'm Jessie. Are you my dad?”

Once Noah knows about his daughter, he's no longer in a mood to shake hands and walk away; he's furious, and he's determined to have a part in raising his child. The rest of the story happens only because of Jessie. Yet, though we see Jessie interacting with each parent, the majority of the story is about Noah and Janey, with their daughter remaining on the edges of the action.

The Villain

Not all romance novels have villains, and in the ones that do, the villain may be important enough to be considered a significant third character or he may be a secondary character, less crucial and less well developed. The villain's goal is usually not directly connected to the romance. He isn't trying to break up the couple; they're just standing in his way as he's trying to get revenge, acquire money, or eliminate a threat. So the classic villain is much more likely to appear in single-title or mainstream books, historicals, or long contemporaries.

Creating too many secondary characters—filling the landscape with friends and co-workers and neighbors—is a common problem for new writers. Every secondary character takes time and space and attention away from the hero and heroine. Before you create another character, think about those who already exist and ask yourself if one of them could take on an additional role. I sometimes think, “If this were a movie script, would this part be worth hiring an actor to play? Or would I assign the lines to someone I’ve already agreed to pay?”

If your heroine has two best friends, can you combine them into one? If she has four kids, do you really need them all, or can you show her as a mom with one or two?

Types of Secondary Characters

Romance novels don't have a standard cast of supporting characters. In many books, the heroine has a best friend in whom she can confide, but there's no requirement to construct such a character. There are some types of secondary characters that appear frequently, however. Each type offers potential for the story but can also detract from the main romance.

The Significant Third

A good many modern romances involve a very specific kind of secondary character, one who falls into a gray area between a main character and a secondary character. This significant third character is far more important than other secondary characters. Typically, this person is the cause of the conflict, or the reason for the story—she's central to the action. Because of this character's important role, there is generally only one significant third in a story.

The significant third character is most often the child of the hero or heroine, though she can be a parent, sibling, or friend who plays a very large part in the story. If the hero and heroine are together only because they've been named guardians to an orphaned six-year-old, the child is the significant third character. If the hero needs the heroine to provide care for his very sick father, and much of the story happens at the old man's bedside, the father is likely to be the significant third character. If the story is a psychological thriller in which the hero and heroine know exactly who's chasing them, the villain is often the significant third character.

It's a challenge to keep this character in her proper place—at the edge of the main story, not in the middle. It's easy to get careless and drift away from the main characters toward

the significant third, particularly when this extra character is a child. We're almost programmed to put a child's needs before those of adults, and that carries through in odd ways when writing about a child. The result—anything from a textbook on child raising to a dictionary of baby talk—isn't a romance.

Many a romance novel has been destroyed by a significant third who became too important. The romance *must* remain firmly fixed on the two main characters.

Even if the most troublesome problem between them revolves around the significant third, it is the tension between the two main characters that is important.

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category romances—all of which have more room for complex subplots, mysteries, or intrigue.

A truly powerful and effective villain must have something sympathetic about him or he will be interchangeable with dozens of other forgettable bad guys. The readers don't have to approve of his breaking in to the bank vault, but if they understand—and maybe even respect—his reasons, he'll be a much more effective foil for the hero and heroine.

A villain always has a reason for doing what he does—and he's always convinced it's an excellent reason. In real life, a bad guy's reasoning may make no sense to other people, even though it seems perfectly legitimate to him. In fiction, however, the more logical the villain's reasoning is, the more involved the readers will be in the outcome. If you explain your villain's actions by simply saying that he's crazy, you won't satisfy your readers.

In this selection from her single-title historical *The Warrior*, Claire Delacroix shows her villain justifying any means to gain control of an important relic—because it will establish his claim to take over his enemies' land:

At the original site of Inverfyre, Dubhglas MacLaren worried the scarred flesh where his eye had once been. ... He ... stood outside the burned wreckage of the chapel, the wind tousling his hair as he gazed upon the splendor of the new Inverfyre.

Soon it would be his own.

Hopefully, his man ... would discover the location of the Titulus Croce, for Dubhglas would need the relic to be invested as Laird of Inverfyre. His possession of it would prove the legitimacy of his claim to the common people. ...

In Dubhglas's mind, this relic is important enough to kill for. Though we as readers don't agree with his reasoning, we understand why he feels that way; Dubhglas is a scarier opponent for the hero and heroine because it's clear that he won't be easily stopped.

The Other Woman

Not every romance novel includes an Other Woman who competes for the hero's attention and love, but many do. She might be a current girlfriend or an ex-wife, a co-worker, a friend, or someone he's never paid attention to at all. The Other Woman provides opposition to the heroine and adds an extra level of interest.

Like the villain, the Other Woman is more effective if she's at least somewhat sympathetic—at least in the beginning. If it's instantly obvious to the readers that she's a complete bitch, how could your supposedly intelligent hero ever have fallen for her? And if she's clearly a self-centered liar, why does your supposedly intelligent heroine believe her? But if she starts out as a reasonable person, it will be even more shocking when she

ultimately reveals her inner Hastiness.

And if you give the Other Woman not only some redeeming characteristics but a reason for her interference (not just a desire to make the heroine miserable), you'll create a much more interesting and believable scenario.

The heroine should never descend to the Other Woman's level, but she should be able to put the Other Woman in her place—as does Melody, the heroine of Annette Blair's single title *The Kitchen Witch*.

“Witch,” Tiffany said, almost, but not quite, beneath her breath. . . .

“Shark,” Melody said, in the same low biting manner.

Tiffany stiffened, and Logan began to cough.

“Over there,” Melody said. “In the aquarium, isn’t that a shark?”

Melody makes her point and puts Tiffany on notice not to attack her again, but because she hasn’t exactly called Tiffany a name, she hasn’t sacrificed her standing as a heroine.

Though the Other Woman can play a pivotal part in the romance, she is a secondary character, and she shouldn’t take over the story. Since she can sometimes be more fun to write about than the heroine, limit the amount of time the Other Woman and the hero are together without the heroine present. Avoid writing from the Other Woman’s point of view, because going into her thoughts takes the focus off the heroic couple.

The Wrong Man

The masculine equivalent of the Other Woman is the Wrong Man—the one who’s bad news for the heroine in one way or another. He might be her fiance, ex-hus-band, or the man she’s dating when she meets the hero. The heroine may have dated him just once, but he continues to pursue her because he’s convinced she’s the only woman for him. Or, he might not be anything at all to her, but he’d like to be.

The Wrong Man comes in many varieties. He’s not necessarily a bad man, he’s just wrong for the heroine. He may be so devoted to his job that he has no real time for the heroine, or he might be so passive and dependent that he’s more like a doormat than a man. Alternatively, he might be so nice and agreeable that he has no convictions or strength. He may be using the heroine financially or emotionally. Or he might simply be self-centered, arrogant, and oblivious to her needs.

In any of these variations, the Wrong Man can be thoroughly unpleasant if he doesn’t get his way, and he’s not above deliberately causing trouble between the hero and heroine.

The heroine may have already realized how bad this man is for her, or she may come to understand this during the story because of the contrast between the Wrong Man and the hero.

The Wrong Man can be just as much fun to create as the Other Woman. But it makes sense to be careful when building the character, especially if you want your heroine to be seriously involved with him before she meets and falls in love with the hero. If he’s so bad

for her, or he's such a loser, why hasn't your brilliant heroine seen through him already? If you let him show his true colors slowly and subtly, your readers and the heroine will discover together exactly how awful he is.

In her sweet traditional *That Old Feeling*, Cara Colter shows the moment her heroine, while talking to the hero, realizes that the guy she's been dating is the Wrong Man:

“I have to leave,” she said, and hoped he could not hear the faint note of desperation in her voice. ... “First thing in the morning. ... I’ve had a call from Jason.”

“Ah,” [Clint] said. ... “And Jason is?”

“A friend. A good friend. The boy who’s asked me to marry him, actually.”

She knew as soon as she blurted it out how wrong it sounded, but he picked up on the part of it that was wrong.

“A boy,” he said, with the softest edge of scorn.

And she knew it was true. Jason was a boy. Immature and self-centered, perhaps even colossally so. They’d been friends for years, and none of those things had mattered, as long as they were just friends.

Then ... in a moment that was probably inspired by too much champagne, Jason had seen her romantically. ...

She had said she needed time to think things over, but her time with Clint was not helping her sort through anything. It just confused everything more.

Only one thing was crystal clear: Clint was a man. Jason was a boy.

Until she compared him with the hero, Colter’s heroine thought that Jason was a pretty good guy. But once she spots the contrast between Jason and Clint, she can’t ever go back to thinking that Jason might be right for her.

Like the Other Woman, the Wrong Man may try to take over the story, absorbing space and story time. Be wary of letting the focus of the story slide off of the main characters and onto the Wrong Man.

The Parent/Grandparent

Meddlesome parents, grandparents, and other assorted *relatives* used to be a staple of the romance novel. Now that young adults are more independent and less concerned about what others think of them, the managing relative is less useful to the romance novelist. But that doesn’t mean the breed has died out.

However, the relative plays a different role today than she did in the past. Instead of matchmaking or actively manipulating the hero and heroine, the relative expresses a real problem or need that the hero and heroine get caught up in resolving.

A big temptation when dealing with a parent or grandparent is to let the story drift into details of the past, concentrating on things like the relationship between parent and child during the adolescent years—whether or not it has anything to do with the current story.

Occasionally the parent/grandparent doubles as the villain, as in Jo Beverley's single-title historical *The Devil's Heiress*. In this passage, the hero, Hawk, confronts his father, who he suspects is planning to destroy the family estate:

Hawk was blunt. "Is Slade planning more building here?" His father twitched, then looked away. "Why?" Guilt, for sure.

But then the squire looked back, arrogance in place. "What business is it of yours? I still rule here, boy. ..."

"It is my inheritance, sir," Hawk said, "and thus my business. What is Slade planning, and why are you permitting it? ... I was told that there were men here who sounded like surveyors studying the area along the river and that they later spoke to Slade. What interest could Slade have down here? There is no available land. ..."

"You might as well know. Slade's planning to tear down this place, and the cottages too, and build himself a grand riverside villa. ..."

Doubt and fear stirred. His father, for all his faults, was not a fool, nor had his illness turned him mad. "What have you done?"

The squire took a sip of brandy, managing to look down his long, straight nose. ... "I have gained a peerage for us."

The father's actions prompt the rest of the story, as Hawk's efforts to save the family home force him to court a woman he doesn't love.

The Extended Family

Sometimes it seems that romance heroes and heroines come in just two varieties—those who have no family at all (or at least *none* that they want to speak to) and those who have enormous, close, warm-and-fuzzy families.

Family members can be terrific tools for giving information to the readers. They're likely to be delightfully and brutally frank, they can act as a catalyst for a main character's action or change of heart, and they know more about the hero's or heroine's past experiences than most friends do.

One danger with using family members as characters is becoming too involved in explaining the family relationships. If you find yourself detailing the birth order of siblings, or how their current quarrels and disagreements hark back to their childhood days, refocus the story on the hero and heroine.

It's tempting sometimes to throw a kid into a story just for the entertainment value—maybe an ornery little brother, the precocious child of the hero or heroine, a cute niece or nephew. But unless this child is an important part of the plot, think twice. Even if the child is an important secondary character, it's easy to allow her to distract you from the main story. Send the kid out to play or put her down for a nap so you can keep the focus on the hero and heroine.

The Best Friends

Next to family members, friends are the most likely characters to speak their minds. They're also the characters most able to influence a main character's actions. Unlike heroes and heroines, friends aren't restricted to speaking gently and being polite. Showing a hero or heroine interacting with a friend is one of the best ways to demonstrate what sort of person the main character is.

Friends are also a good source of information for the hero or heroine, allowing the author to share details in an interesting way. In her long contemporary *The Secret Wedding Dress*, Roz Denny Fox shows her heroine, Sylvie, and her best friend as they piece together information about Sylvie's new neighbor:

Anita heard the bumping going on next door, and paused. "Has someone moved into Iva's house?"

"In the process of moving. See the van? ... You mean you haven't heard any scuttlebutt at work?" Anita was the loan manager for Briarwood's only bank.

"We wouldn't necessarily hear if there's no mortgage involved. Iva's great-nephew probably sold the property. I think he's employed by a newspaper in Atlanta. Iva used to brag on him. ... I can't remember, but I think he may have been Iva's only living relative."

"Wouldn't we know if he'd listed the property for sale?" Sylvia ducked to see if she could ascertain what was going on next door.

"I suppose it's conceivable the nephew just retired."

"Then he's not the man I saw carrying stuff in from the car. And there's a little girl. She can't be more than six or seven."

Through their dialogue, the two characters fill in the reader while the main character also finds out what's going on. (We'll talk more about the use of dialogue in chapter twelve.)

Friends or groups of friends sometimes creep into stories because the author would like to write sequels featuring related characters. New writers often spend so much time and effort setting up such a sequel that they get distracted from the initial story. Or, in an effort to make a secondary character suitable to star in her own books, they try so hard to preserve the heroic qualities of the character that she doesn't fulfill the useful role she should be playing in the first story. Make sure your secondary characters stay in a secondary role.

TERTIARY CHARACTERS

Tertiary or third-level characters are the walk-ons, the extras who probably have no recurring part in the story. Because they're less important to the plot, they may not have names at all, or they may have only a single name. Examples might be the butler, the waitress, and the secretary, all of whom function in the story without being a critical part of it.

It's a good idea to check all the tertiary characters to see which ones are really necessary. Can you combine several of them into one?

The appearance of large numbers of tertiary characters can be a tip-off to poor scene construction. For instance, if a cab driver appears once in your story, is he really necessary? Unless something important happens during the heroine's cab ride—something that seriously impacts the story—it might be better to begin the scene with the heroine's arrival at the party, rather than with her getting in the cab. Eliminating the cab ride also removes the need for the cab driver.

The goal is not to do away with tertiary characters altogether but to avoid using precious space on them unless they're a real benefit to the story. In her long contemporary *Cinderella Christmas*, Shelley Galloway's heroine meets a shoe salesman, a tertiary character who will fill the role of fairy godmother:

She ventured in farther, all too aware of how her own sneakers stood out among the beautiful sandals and designer pumps.

But those feelings were quickly forgotten when she saw the gold sandals.

“May I help you?” The same salesman who’d approached her the day before appeared by her side. His voice was curiously comforting, as if the question that he probably asked a hundred times a day was actually sincere.

“Yes, please. I’m interested in this pair of sandals.”

His eyes flicked to her outfit of faded Levi’s, black turtleneck sweater and worn tennis shoes. “In size ...”

“Sorry. Size five, please. Narrow, if you have them.”

“Narrow, too?” As if he favored small feet, the corners of his lips turned up, stretching his thin face. “Very well, ma’am. If you’ll have a seat?”

Later the heroine finds out that the salesman’s first name is Warren. Notice, however, that we know little else about him—despite the fact that his assistance is what allows the heroine to have her very successful evening at the ball.

SHOWING YOUR CHARACTERS

Now that you’ve gotten to know your character options, how can you best convey your characters to your readers? You can tell the readers about them. That’s the easiest—and least effective—way. Saying to the readers, “Sally was a nice and compassionate person” really doesn’t convey much information. For one thing, definitions of *nice* and *compassionate* differ from individual to individual. And for another, you’re asking the readers to accept without question your judgment of Sally rather than coming to their own conclusion.

Alternatively, if the character is an important one, you can use the character’s thoughts, words, and actions to *show* the kind of person she is. And you can say a lot about a character through what she *doesn’t* say or do. If, for example, she has the opportunity to make a perfectly justified sarcastic comment—the kind it’s very hard to resist—but restrains herself instead of speaking, the readers suddenly know a lot about the sort of person this character is.

The most effective ways of illustrating character allow the readers to see the evidence, then reach the conclusion for themselves. *Showing* your characters draws readers into the story and keeps them fully engaged in figuring *out* these people. Slowly sharing the pertinent information about important people—as opposed to just dumping it all in one long passage—adds a sense of realism to your story.

Think of how you learn about the new people you meet. You usually don’t exchange complete life stories on first introduction. Often, after knowing someone for years, you find yourself saying, “I never knew that! You never told me that!” Your characters should reveal themselves the same way—gradually, sometimes without even realizing what they’re revealing.

There are a number of devices through which you can reveal character traits in a way that makes the readers feel they’re right there—watching, listening, and making their own judgments about the people they’re getting to know. The more personally involved with the characters the readers feel, the more absorbed they will be in the story.

And the more important the characters are to the story, the more crucial it is to *show*, rather than tell, the details that matter most. Each of the following techniques can be used alone or in combination with others to make your characters unforgettable. You can show a character:

- **Through the character’s own thoughts.** This doesn’t mean the character psychoanalyzes himself or thinks, “I’m a really considerate and intelligent person.” The way your mind works illustrates the kind of person you are. If a character thinks compassionately of another person, the readers get the message. In her inspirational romance *Deck the Halls*, Arlene James’s hero thinks about himself in a slightly self-deprecating manner, leading us to believe he’s better looking than he gives himself credit for, but also that he’s humble:

Vince didn’t know about being “tall, dark and delish,” but he didn’t think he was a “bald warthog,” either. He’d happily give up the single state the moment that God brought the right woman into his life.

If Vince had said to himself, “I’m good-looking and I’m positive God’s spending his time finding a woman for me,” we’d have an entirely different view of him.

- **Through the character’s own words.** This technique isn’t usually used directly—in the form of “I’m a charming and modest person”—unless it’s to prove the opposite of what’s being said. But what a person says about her actions, intentions, and history can be very revealing—often unintentionally so. And a person who defends another says something important about them both. In her romantic comedy *Catch and Keep*, Hannah Bernard uses irony to show the hero’s female friend as anything but the Other Woman she’s trying to sound like:

“You know what they say,” she said as she grabbed her small suitcase and they walked together to the plane. “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. Someday I will get back at you for rejecting me. I won’t rest until I find you the love of your life and bring you to your knees.”

By showing this snippet of humor from the friend, the author also characterizes the hero, an unusual man to have a female friend close enough to talk to him like this.

• **Through the character's own actions.** If the character acts in a down-to-earth, practical way, chances are she's a down-to-earth, practical person. Or if she draws back a fist to hit a child, she's painted herself as a villain. In her chick-lit novel *Can You Keep a Secret?*, Sophie Kinsella shows her heroine as warm and caring, despite being somewhat ditzy, when she rescues a toy for a child she's never met before:

The guy with the laptop is still typing. Behind him is a little blond boy of maybe two, sitting with a beautiful dark girl. As I watch, the boy drops a plastic wheel on the floor. It rolls away, and immediately he starts to wail. ...

Suddenly my eye is caught by a patch of bright color on the floor. It's the wheel. It's rolled under a row of empty seats, right over to the window. ... I unbuckle my seat belt. Somehow I force myself to my feet. Then, with everyone's eyes on me, I bend coolly down to retrieve the wheel.

OK. Now I can't reach the bloody thing.

Well, I'm not giving up, after I've made this big deal about it. Without looking at anyone, I lie right down on the plane floor. ... I shuffle forward, stretch as far as possible ... and at last my fingers close around the plastic wheel. As nonchalantly as I can, I get to my feet, banging my elbow on a seat tray, and hand the plastic wheel to the little boy.

“Here,” I say in my best Superman, all-in-a-day’s-work voice. “I think this is yours.” He clasps it tightly to his chest, and I glow with pride.

A moment later, he hurls the wheel on the floor, and it rolls away, to almost exactly the same place. ...

“Right,” I say after a pause. “Right. Well ... enjoy your flight.”

This woman proves herself a heroine when the kid flings the toy a second time, and she doesn't lose her temper. (She also doesn't fetch it a second time, which makes it pretty clear she's not a wimp.)

• **Through another character's thoughts.** This technique is easy and tempting, but the character doing the thinking should be a major character, not a minor

one. Having the hero think about the heroine can be useful, but allowing the heroine's hairdresser to characterize her takes the focus off the main story. In Deborah Hale's Regency novella *Cupid Goes to Gretna*, the hero's thoughts linger over the heroine just as his gaze does:

As he let his gaze linger over Miss Ivy, Oliver wasn't so sure. In sleep her features had taken on a soft, ingenuous caste that accorded well with her temperament. Like a child, she was full to the brim of high spirits and sunny optimism without a thought to spare for the harsh practicalities of life or the troublesome consequences of her impulsive actions.

Elsewhere in the story, we've seen Miss Ivy's high spirits and sunny optimism for ourselves, but now we know how the hero views her, too.

- **Through another character's words.** What one person says about another can't always be taken at face value, but the opinion is likely to be straightforward and reasonably honest. Whether it's true is a different matter, because that depends on the insight of the person who's talking. In either case, however, the readers get a better picture of the person who's the subject of the conversation. In her single-title contemporary *First Lady*, Susan Elizabeth Phillips gives a thumbnail characterization of a character through the hero's words:

The attorney glanced at the folder, then looked back up at Mat. "You admit your ex-wife was pregnant with the older girl when you married her."

"... Sandy told me the kid was mine, and I believed her until ... one of her girlfriends told me the truth. ..."

"You sent her money for a number of years."...

"Sentiment. Sandy had a good heart; she just wasn't too discriminating about who she slept with."

Of course, while Mat's telling us about his late ex-wife, he's saying quite a bit about himself as well.

- **Through another character's actions.** If a character walks through a room and the dog cringes to get out of her way, nobody needs to say much about the kind of person that character is. Without resorting to graphic violence, Roxanne Rustand uses a daughter's reactions to her abusive father to give us a clear picture of him in her long contemporary category romance *A Montana Family*.

He turned and started down the hill, one meaty hand clenched tight as a tourniquet around her arm.

She tried to escape into that secret place where she didn't feel the pain. ... She knew all too well what awaited her in that house. ...

She charged forward and rammed into her father's back. ... And then she ran for her life.

This daughter's reaction—first attempting to mentally distance herself, then resorting to physical violence, and then fleeing—clearly shows what sort of man her father is.

- **Through physical description.** This is probably the most-used characterization technique—especially by inexperienced authors—and one of the least effective. It's particularly useless when the description is phrased in generalities or when

it is overly detailed. Standards of beauty vary, so merely saying, "She was beautiful" will mean very different things to different people. But listing the details that mean beauty to you may turn off readers with a different definition.

When a point-of-view character describes another character, the readers get a picture of both of them, as shown in Arlene James's inspirational romance *Deck the Halls-*.

He backed up a step ... and took in the whole of her oval face.

It was a bit too long to be labeled classically pretty, just as her nose seemed a bit too prominent to be called pert. But those eyes and the lush contours of a generous mouth, along with high, prominent cheekbones and the sultry sweep of eyebrows a shade darker than her golden-brown hair made a very striking, very feminine picture, indeed. The hair was the finishing touch, her “crowning glory,” as the Scriptures said. Thick and straight with a healthy, satiny shine, it hung well past her shoulders, almost to her elbows.

In this passage we see the heroine, but we also get to know a lot more about the hero because of the specific details he notices and chooses to describe.

• **Through habits or individual traits.** Bad habits are often more illustrative than good ones, though either can be used to characterize. A man who issues a lunch invitation and then dodges the check creates a lasting impression. In her chick-lit novel *Can You Keep a Secret?*, Sophie Kinsella paints a quick but effective portrait of the heroine’s grandfather:

“I never throw away cards.” Grandpa gives me a long look. “When you get to my age; when the people you’ve known and loved all your life start to pass away ... you want to hang onto any memento. However small.” ...

I reach for the nearest card and open it. ... “Grandpa! This is from Smith’s Electrical Maintenance, 1965!”

In just a few words, Kinsella has shown us a guy who’s not only got a collection of stuff but a sense of humor about it.

• **Through the props that surround the character.** A character who clings to a favorite ratty sweater, her mother’s teddy bear, or a scrapbook full of clippings gives the readers a view of the things she thinks are important—and thus of the kind of person she is. If the hero walks in carrying a tennis racquet or a shotgun or a Bible, the readers will know quite a bit about him before he says a word.

Lots of women like chocolate, but in her chick-lit novel *Third Time Lucky*, Claire Cross shows us a heroine who’s almost defined by chocolate:

I know the fundamental right of every mortal to eat chocolate is in the Geneva Convention. ...

Many foods have been banished from my kitchen and diet because of their betrayal of me in those dark teenage years ... but my relationship with chocolate is beyond such restrictions.

Our love affair borders on the divine. ... I handle chocolate as a controlled substance, since prolonged exposure results in extreme lateral growth. One chocolate bar every month and not one bite more is my allotment. ...

I buy the chocolate on the first of the month ... and ogle it in the fridge for as long as I can stand it. ...

After that introduction, any time the heroine mentions chocolate the readers get an instant picture of the character’s state of mind.

- **Through the character's name.** A man named Sylvester creates a much different picture in the mind than one named Jake. A woman named Elizabeth is a whole different creature than one named Betsy. Does the name you've chosen for your character fit her personality, her time period, her job, her background? How does the name affect and reflect her personality? In her historical single title *The Warrior*, Claire Delacroix captures not only the personality but the time period as her hero and heroine discuss what she should call him.

“I would not have matters so formal between us. ... You need not address me as your lord when we are alone.”

“Shall I call you Magnus? ... Or Michael?”

“The choice is yours, lady mine.”

“Then I shall call you Hawk. ... For your repute seems to fit your nature well. Does the hawk not tear out the heart of what it kills, then leave the rest as carrion?”

Here we also get a picture of this historical hero's willingness to compromise, unusual for a real man of his time, and also of the historical heroine's typical independence. Even when she's in his power, she can't resist tweaking him.

- **Through narrative description.** Simply stating a character's type or traits, without showing examples of behavior or thoughts to illustrate the statement, requires the readers to take your word rather than drawing conclusions of their own. Writing something like, “She was efficient at her job

and thoughtful of everyone” is among the least effective ways of showing a character. When dealing with secondary characters, however, narrative description is sometimes the fastest and most efficient way to make the point,

as when Arlene James introduces us to the hero's small niece in her inspirational romance *Deck the Halls*:

Four-year-old Elizabeth Ann, known affectionately to the family as Bets, effectively commanded the coterie of Cutler grandchildren, numbering six in all. An only child, to the growing dismay of her parents, she'd never had any trouble holding her own against her five older cousins, four of whom were boys.

Since Elizabeth Ann isn't a main character or even a significant third, showing her in action with all those boy cousins would take up space better spent on developing the romantic relationship.

All of these techniques for showing characters work as well in other genres as in romance, but in romance novels it's particularly important to show rather than tell whenever possible, so the readers will feel like an important part of the story as they draw conclusions of their own about what sort of people the characters are.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Naming characters can be a very important part of developing their personalities. The first question, of course, is whether the name is appropriate for the character. The

character we thought was Michelle might in fact call herself Mike—and that's a whole different sort of woman.

Most romance heroes' names are short, and they often start with one of the hard consonants, like B, D, G, J, or K. The firm sound of the name seems to help characterize the hero as a no-nonsense man of action.

Not only can a character's name help to show what kind of person she is, it can hint at the character's history and background. It may even help in a minor way to foreshadow story developments or to push them along. If a character named Courtney is told that her birth father was an attorney, her mother's action in choosing that name takes on significance and helps to convince Courtney that the story is true.

But there are other important factors in choosing names for characters. Consider the look and the sound of a name, and its relationship to the names of other characters. Is the name easy to pronounce? Will it be familiar to the readers? If not, is it spelled phonetically so the readers won't be confused? Does the first name fit well with the chosen surname? Is it so much like the names of other characters that it might be confusing on the page?

Unusual or unfamiliar names or spellings work best for main characters or significant secondary characters—not for characters who appear briefly and infrequently—because an unusual name may be more difficult for the readers to recall. If you use unusual names for both main characters, you multiply the risk of confusion. If you want to use a creative name for one main character, choose a

simpler, easily recognized and gender-specific name for the other main character. If in doubt, retreat to basic, long-popular names.

Make certain that the names you choose are appropriate to the time. Brooke and Dakota make fine contemporary characters, but in a Regency romance, they'd be out of place. Hazel or Mildred would be unusual choices for contemporary heroines, and the effect on the readers would be to remind them at every turn that they're reading a story.

And think about the names in your story in respect to relationships between the characters. If you name a mother Jessica and her small daughter Thelma, your readers—who would associate the name Thelma with someone of an older generation—may have difficulty keeping them straight.

It is also wise to avoid using several names that start with the same letter. Readers who are consuming your story in snatches need all the help they can get to avoid confusion, and the repetitive initial may cause them to stumble on each name as they try to recall who's who.

Be cautious of using names that rhyme, like Derrick and Eric; of using unisex names, like Pat and Chris; of using names spelled in such a way that the character's gender isn't clear, like Jeramie; of using names most commonly identified with one sex for a character of the opposite sex, like Jack for a girl or Robin for a boy; of using hero-type names used for the Wrong Man (if there's both a Jake and a Matt, the readers may have trouble keeping them straight, but if you name one of them Gary or Kevin, it's pretty clear who's

who); of using names with unclear pronunciations; and of using two names that look very similar typographically, such as Lee and Les.

Referring to Your Characters

When you're referring to characters via narrative or describing the action in your story, choose one name or nickname and use it consistently. If you refer to your hero sometimes as Jake, sometimes as Mr. Wilder, and sometimes as the Professor, the readers are going to become confused about who is who and how many people are involved. If you decide to call the hero Jake, use that name consistently in your narrative and your dialogue tags.

In contrast, when characters talk to each other, the names they use will vary. The doorman will call your hero Mr. Wilder, his students will call him Professor or Dr. Wilder, and the heroine might call him anything from Wild Card on down. But in straightforward narrative, he should have one name and one name only.

There are two exceptions to this rule. First, if your heroine is usually referred to as Elizabeth but the hero thinks of her as Betsy, then when you're writing from his point of view, you can refer to her as Betsy in narrative as well as in his dialogue. Consistency is the key.

The other exception occurs early in the book and concerns both the hero and heroine. If they've just met for the first time, they're probably not on a first-name basis. If the first section of the book is in the heroine's point of view, the heroine will probably refer to the hero by both first and last name until a connection begins to form between the characters. If you're writing from the hero's point of view, he may think of the heroine as Melanie Stafford for a while before switching to Mela-nie or Mel. Once he makes the switch, however, the style should remain consistent.

IN REVIEW: Surveying Secondary Characters

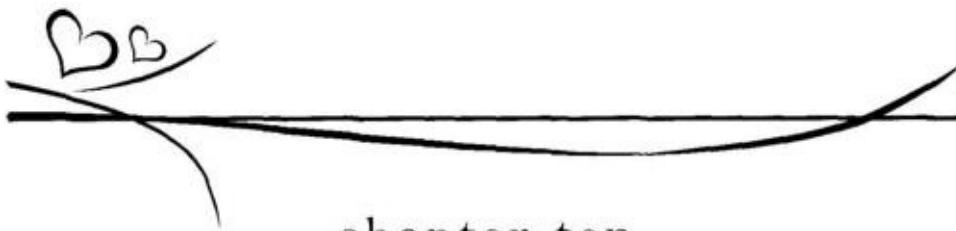


1. Look through the romance novels you've been studying. How many secondary characters are there?
2. Is there a villain? An Other Woman? A Wrong Man? A significant third?
3. What purposes do the secondary characters fulfill?
4. How much do you learn about the secondary characters themselves? About their private lives? About their opinions regarding the main characters?

Surveying Your Secondary Characters

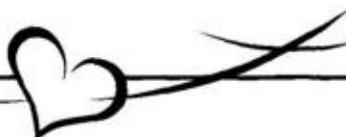


1. What types of secondary characters will be useful in telling your story?
2. Will the heroine have a best friend, a co-worker, a sister? What secondary characters will be most closely involved with the hero?
3. How can your secondary characters help tell the story?
4. Write a scene in which the hero or heroine talks to a secondary character about the other main character.



chapter ten

Creating Sexual Tension and Love Scenes



The love scenes in a romance novel are different from those in other kinds of fiction. Love scenes in romance novels are integral to the plot and to character development, thus they're more important than love scenes in most other fiction. Since the love developing between the main characters is such an *enormous part of* a romance novel, the physical expression of that love is a crucial element of the story.

Like many components of romance novels, however, love scenes and all their particulars are difficult to sum up in a few words. People who haven't read a lot of romance novels are apt to ask, "Is there always a love scene?" or "How many love scenes are there in the average romance?" or "Where are the love scenes placed? Should there be one in the first chapter?"

The answer to all these questions is "It depends on the kind of romance novel." There are many varieties of romance novel, and physical affection is handled a bit differently in each one. A wide range of love scenes from many different kinds of romances appears later in this chapter.

LOVE SCENES

It's important to understand that a love scene isn't the same as a sex scene; a love scene in the romance novel can be any physical expression of affection between the main characters. A kiss, a hug, a touch between hero and heroine are all love scenes on a smaller scale. Even a look can sizzle with sensuality, and a foot massage—if well written—can be as arousing for the readers as a sex act.

Relatively speaking, sex is a very small part of love, and romance novels—even those toward the erotic end of the spectrum—are love stories, not sex stories.

While it's hard to picture two people falling in love without displaying any physical affection at all, a romance novel might include nothing more than a touch of the hand here and there, and a single chaste kiss on the last page. Or it may include mind-bending and intimately described oral, vaginal, and even anal sex in every chapter.

Physical attraction between the characters is important, of course, but when their attraction is deeply emotional as well, the love scene will be far more involving for the

readers.

To be effective, love scenes have to fit into the course of the story and heighten the tension and conflict. Even if the actual love scene is a calm interlude in the conflict between the two main characters, the act of loving should lead to increased difficulties later. Every love scene should have a purpose in the development of the overall story, not just be there to titillate the readers. If the love scene can be removed without destroying the story, it shouldn't be there in the first place.

Two people who have slept together are going to behave differently afterward. They will not hop out of bed the next morning acting as if nothing happened the night before. Their actions have changed them and the situation—and, inevitably, the rest of the story. Once your lovers have kissed, touched, or made love, they may try to pretend it never happened—but they, and the readers, can't forget.

In many beginning writers' stories, love scenes are like frosting on a cake. Frosting is applied to the surface, and it adds nicely to the taste. But essentially it changes nothing—the cake is still the same underneath. A good love scene is more like applying heat to the cake batter—once it has started to bake, the cake gets a lot tastier, and there's no way to reverse the process.

Sexual Tension

The most sensual romances aren't necessarily those in which there's a lot of sex, but those in which there is a high level of sexual tension. Beginning writers often mistakenly consider foreplay synonymous with sexual tension. The characters do not need to be touching in order to create sexual tension; they certainly do not need to be kissing or in other intimate contact.

Sexual tension is the unsatisfied attraction of the hero and heroine for each other. The key word here is *unsatisfied*. Why can't they act on their attraction to each other? What's keeping them from getting together? The stronger the reason, the more emotionally involving the story will be.

Sexual tension begins at the moment the main characters meet, with their first awareness of each other. They might be angry, interested, wary, or tense, but their heightened sense of awareness of the other person provides the first stirrings of sexual tension.

In her sweet traditional *The Billionaire Takes a Bride*, Liz Fielding uses the conflict between the characters—and a slow cleaning of a pair of glasses—to increase the sexual tension:

Rich forgot all about the fact that Ginny Lautour was ransacking his wardrobe looking for a spare key to his desk and instead found himself wondering what she'd do with her hands if she didn't have her spectacles as a prop. If she didn't have them to hide behind. And what were they hiding? ...

He removed them—ignoring her gasp of outrage—and held them up out of her reach, checking them against the light, reassuring himself that they weren't just that—a prop, a

disguise.

They were real enough, he discovered ... he opened a drawer, took out a clean handkerchief and began to polish them.

Her fingers twitched as if it was all she could do to stop herself from grabbing them back. He finished one lens, moved on to the next, taking his time about it so that he could get a good look at her eyes.

He hadn't been mistaken about them. Grey and green intermingled in a bewitching combination beneath a curtain of dark lashes that were all hers. No magic mascara to lengthen or curl them, they'd be soft to the touch, silk to his lips, he thought. And he wanted to touch. ...

He restrained himself. ... More exciting than the most blatant of invitations, this veiled promise of hidden fire tugged at something deep inside him.

Or was it simply a mask to hide her true purpose?

If Rich weren't hesitating to get closer because he found Ginny trying to break into his desk, Fielding's scene would be flat—because they're pretty obviously attracted to each other.

In this passage from Nicola Cornick's historical novella *The Season for Suitors*, her hero is ostensibly teaching the heroine how to avoid being taken advantage of by an unscrupulous man:

The path was narrow here and wended its way through thick shrubbery. Even in winter the trees and bushes grew dark and close overhead, enclosing them in a private world. It was a little disconcerting to discover just how alone they were in this frosty, frozen wilderness.

[The Duke of] Fleet was smiling gently. "Take this as a free piece of advice, Miss Davencourt," he said. "Always pay attention to your surroundings. The aim of the rake will always be to separate you from company so that he may compromise you."

He put up a hand and touched one gloved finger lightly to her cheek. Her gaze flew to his as the featherlight touch burned like a brand.

"And once he has you to himself," the duke continued softly, "a rake will waste no time in kissing you, Miss Davencourt."

For what seemed an age they stared into each other's eyes. Clara's heart twisted with longing and regret. ... Her body ached for him with a sudden, fierce fire. His presence engulfed her. She felt shaky, hot with longing. She raised her hand and brushed him away. Her fingers were not quite steady.

"Your point is well made, your grace." Her voice was husky and she cleared her throat. "I shall guard against that possibility."

Notice that the only touch is his gloved finger to her cheek; there's not even skin-to-skin contact. Cornick has used the rules of society—which at the time forbade an

unmarried woman to be alone with a man—to build sexual tension. If the Duke had gone ahead and kissed Clara, much of the tension in the scene would evaporate, because we'd no longer have to wonder what that kiss would be like and wait for it to happen.

In her erotic contemporary novella *Out of Control*, Rachelle Chase uses a great deal more touching, but the sexual tension is increased because of what the couple *doesn't* do:

He chuckled. There was no humor in the sound. “If I let you leave, Ms. Thomas, you’ll talk yourself out of it before you reach the lobby.”

If he let her leave? Tingles skipped up her arms at the forcefulness of that statement. His warm breath bounced off her lips, enticing her, drawing her closer. A slight tilt of her head and she would be able to taste him, just as she'd fantasized about doing.

One tiny movement.

Unwillingly, her eyelids lowered, her head tilted, and her lips brushed ... his cheek.

Her eyes flew open.

His tongue flickered against her earlobe.

“Did you want me to kiss you, Ms. Thomas,” he whispered huskily into her ear. “Like this?” he asked, letting his lips nibble and his tongue swirl their way down her neck.

Astrid shivered, a moan escaping her.

“Was that a yes?” he rasped, his mouth moving across her collarbone and up her throat.

What was happening to her? “Oh ...”

He suckled her chin. “Say it.”

Kiss me.

She wouldn’t say it.

His tongue moved up, tracing her lower lip. “Say it,” he said hoarsely.

She struggled to free her hands.

His grip tightened.

Kiss me.

If she didn’t get away from him, she was going to say it. She was going to arch toward him, strain to meet his lips ...

His hold on her hands loosened, lightly caressing, no longer restraining. He pulled back and stared unsmilingly at her. The hunger radiating from his gaze stunned her.

Abruptly, her hands were free. “You’ve got ten minutes,” he said. His voice sounded rusty.

“Ten minutes?” she asked drunkenly.

“To think about it.” He left the room.

If Astrid had given in and asked the unnamed hero to kiss her, Chase's couple would have been well on their way to admitting their attraction, and we'd have been cheated out of the fun of figuring out why she can't or won't surrender.

Three very different styles—traditional, historical, erotic—and in all three cases, withholding a kiss creates much more interest and tension in the scene. But it's not just that the hero and heroine *don't* kiss; the sexual tension is increased because there's a real reason they don't.

Dissipating Sexual Tension

One of the easiest ways to dissipate sexual tension is to let the lovers admit their feelings too early in the story. Once the readers know that he's wild about her (and he knows it) and she's wild about him (and she knows it)—*even if the hero and heroine haven't told each other*—the sexual tension evaporates. The resulting warm, cuddly feeling is highly desirable at the end of the book, but it's murder if it happens halfway through.

Another way to lose the sexual tension is to let the lovers consummate their relationship too early in the story. The unwritten rules of the romance novel don't allow casual sex, and the readers know those rules, even if they can't enunciate them.

Even in chick-lit, which technically allows the heroine to make love with more than one man, it's a rare heroine who actually does. In chick-lit, if there is more than one man, sex with the wrong one is perfunctory, ho-hum, even clinical rather than enthusiastic. With the hero, the heroine has meaningful, emotional, special sex that indicates that a serious and lasting relationship has begun.

Erotica, too, is a special case. In erotica, the characters are making love—or at least having sex—frequently throughout the story. The most effective erotica presents characters who, though they are liberated sexually, have good reasons to avoid permanent commitments, so the readers are kept uncertain about how the couple will end up together.

Because of the no-casual-sex tradition, once the hero and heroine have made love, the readers know that at some level they're committed to each other, even if they're still shown as having doubts about their relationship. So the sexual tension is reduced, and only a very strong conflict will keep the readers' doubts going at that point.

If, however, the problem between the hero and heroine is still so deep and so threatening after they have made love that they may not reach a happy ending no matter how good their lovemaking is, then the sexual tension still exists. In fact, it may even be stronger, because they're no longer just fantasizing about what it would be like to be together. They know exactly what's at risk, and that raises the stakes even higher.

Delaying the Love Scene

A *delayed* love scene is nearly always a more effective love scene, one that keeps the readers eagerly reading as they wish for more.

But don't break off a love scene just to frustrate the readers, or just to keep the story from progressing too fast. There has to be a darned good reason why two people who are

ready to make love—or even kiss, for that matter—suddenly change their minds.

Delaying a love scene doesn't mean avoiding the subject. Don't send the hero off to fight in the wars, leaving the heroine knitting at home. Instead, dangle the idea in front of the readers: Show the lovers' feelings developing; show them sharing their questions and their doubts; play on their uncertainties about each other, using every moment they're together to heighten their desire for each other. If the hero and heroine don't know whether they can trust the other person, the readers don't know either—and they have to keep reading to find out.

Keep in mind that a couple's second sexual encounter is seldom as exciting as the first for the readers. You may be tempted to set the scene in an unusual location or add a slightly kinky twist to keep the excitement level high, but many times the result of that approach isn't exciting at all to the readers—just disquieting. It may be better to delay the important first lovemaking scene than to try to pep up a second one in order to maintain anticipation.

An alternative is to delay the *second* lovemaking scene. Sometimes after the hero and heroine make love once, they have good reason not to repeat the experience, and this too can increase the sexual tension. Because they know what making love together is like, their desire is piqued and the readers' interest level is even higher.

In her single title *You've Got Male*, Elizabeth Bevarly's heroine attempts to entrap the villain through online sex, but she and her partner in the investigation lose control and make love. Then they have to deal with what's happened:

“We should talk about that,” she said. “... about what happened between you and me last night.”

“We had sex,” he said flatly. ...

“And that's all it was,” she said emphatically. ... “It won't happen again.”...

That remark seemed not to surprise him at all. It also seemed to piss him off. Not that she cared.

Nevertheless he sounded agreeable enough. ... “Sounds like we're both on the same page then. Let's get to work.”

Gee, Avery thought, it was just so great when two people could talk like grownups and get right to the heart of a matter. ...

Because their lovemaking was unforeseen and unprofessional, and a repetition would interfere with their investigation, this couple has an excellent reason for calling a halt to further intimacies. Does she really think it's wonderful? Is he really agreeable? Of course not—and every time they look at each other for the rest of the book, they (and the readers) will remember that night.

The Satisfying Love Scene

Love scenes are most effective when they build in intensity from the start of the book to the end. If your romance novel will contain several consummated love scenes (as

erotica and short contemporary category romances often do), the first one should not be the most exotic, the most titillating, the most intense. When you plan the first love scene, think about where you're going to go from that point in order to build the emotional intensity between the couple—and for the readers. Save some of the good stuff for later.

No matter how sweet or spicy the level of sexuality in the story, the most important factor in a love scene is the emotions experienced by the lovers. It isn't who puts which hand where, it's how their feelings—and those of the readers—are touched. The goal of the love scene is to make the readers feel good, warm, and cherished.

That can best be done by using sensual language—words and images that evoke the readers' five senses. Sight, scent, sound, taste, and touch are all important and can be used to great effect.

Avoid euphemisms (*his throbbing shaft* or *her womanly fullness*) and clinical descriptions (it's hard to make words like *cervix* and *scrotum* sound romantic).

The very best love scenes aren't expressed in generic images of fire or lightning but in terms and images appropriate to each character's outlook, mindset, and past experience—even his hobbies or job. A gymnast will think in physical images, while a chef may compare lovemaking to food.

In her chick-lit novella *Return to Sender*, Lisa Cach uses all five senses to create an effective seduction scene:

Ten minutes later a fire was crackling happily, sending heat and an amber glow into the room. He found the sound system, tuned the radio to a station playing Christmas carols, and turned the volume down low. The first flutter of a nervous tremor went through me as he then started turning off all the lights in the room. He left a single dim table lamp lit in the corner, then ignored the vacant rocking chair and sat down beside me, his weight making the cheap futon creak, his body beside me large and

warm. He stretched his arm over the back of the futon, his fingertips draping down to brush my shoulder.

Half-lit room. Wine. Fire. Quiet music. Couch. The classic setup for a smooth slide from conversation to kissing to petting and to that moment when he drew back with a question in his eyes, wanting to know if tonight meant sex. . . .

But oh, he did smell so very good.

Sight, sound, taste, touch, smell—all are used, some of them multiple times, to create a picture the readers can relate to on many levels.

The level of sensuality and physical description in love scenes varies from category to category, and even more from category books to single titles. But no matter what the type of story, the emphasis in romance is on feelings rather than on technical description. A catalog of body parts is pornography, not a romance novel.

How much detail is too much? Sometimes even well-established authors aren't sure where the limits are. Jacqui Bianchi, editorial director of Harlequin's Mills & Boon

division in the 1980s, told of sitting down to lunch with an experienced author at the Ritz Hotel in London, in the early days of spicy *romances*. Just as the waiter was setting her appetizer in front of her, the author leaned across the table to her young editor and boomed, “So tell me, dear, just how much sex can I have? “

The answer, of course, depends on the publisher and the type of romance. But it depends even more on the kind of story, the age and experience of the characters, the setting (for example, a couple stranded alone in the wilderness vs. a couple staying in a family member’s house, where respect for the host and the lack of privacy have an impact), and the readers’ comfort level (for instance, many readers are uncomfortable with unmarried lovers when there is a child nearby).

Today’s heroine—no matter where her story falls in the spectrum of romance novels—is far more likely to go to bed with her hero before the wedding than was a heroine of twenty years ago. (Inspirational are the exception here; in that case, “bedding before wedding” is forbidden.) But common sense is the key. An older and more experienced heroine is more likely to have premarital sex than a younger, virginal one. The heroine’s actions must be consistent with her character and her circumstances.

SAFE SEX AND BIRTH CONTROL

Safe sex can be a troublesome issue for authors of contemporary romance. Should your heroes carry condoms? Should your characters talk about birth control, use it without discussing it, or ignore the subject? Should you give the details or assume the readers will fill in the blanks from their own imaginations?

Some readers are touched by the hero who looks after his lady by asking if she’s protected. Others are turned off by the idea that these people have

gotten as far as the bedroom and still know so little about each other that they have to ask.

Not only do categories vary on these issues, individual editors have distinct views on the subject of birth control and safe sex. How birth control is addressed will also depend greatly on your specific characters, their history, and their story. If a heroine already has a child from a failed relationship, she’s likely to be very careful about birth control in the future.

Study books in the category you’re aiming for—or books similar to your style, length, and subject matter, if you’re writing single title—and then decide what your characters would be likely to do. And remember, however you opt to handle the birth control problem, your readers are looking for fantasy and escape, not instructions on how to avoid HIV

In her romantic comedy *Catch and Keep*, Hannah Bernard uses humor to make sure we know that her characters aren’t taking any chances with birth control:

“Jake . . .” she muttered and he kissed his way up her body to her mouth, then knelt and reached for the foil package on the bedside table and ripped it open with his teeth.

“Let me . . .” She grabbed the condom away from him and sat up, the rosy look of

sensual excitement suddenly replaced by a serious look of determination. “I know how. I practiced on a cucumber.”

Bernard doesn’t just add birth control because of some sort of author’s checklist; instead, she uses this intimate moment to develop character, showing the unique way this heroine has prepared herself for her first lovemaking experience.

VIOLENCE

A trouble spot both in terms of political correctness and reader reaction is violence. Many historical periods were very violent, and the historical romance often reflects that. Contemporary romantic suspense plots also frequently involve violence.

How the violence is handled is important. Detailed descriptions that dwell on torture and pain are not appropriate in the romance novel. Violence is more likely to happen offstage than in a fully described scene, and it often happens before the story actually begins.

Violence within the story is more easily accepted by the readers if the characters (especially the heroine) are portrayed as resourceful rather than helpless when faced with a threat.

In her historical single title *The Warrior*, Claire Delacroix shows the villain attempting to rape the heroine:

He roared and leapt upon her, seizing her hair in his fist before he kissed her brutally. He was heavier than she had anticipated. ... She rolled him toward Nissa’s hiding

place with an effort, fighting against her revulsion. ... He was harsh enough to ensure that she felt a welt rise upon her lip.

When he lifted his head and fingered the swelling with satisfaction, he had only long enough to smile before Aileen spied Nissa. The maid lifted the brass candlestick high. Aileen kept her expression demure so that her assailant would not be warned, then Nissa brought it down upon his head with a loud crack.

Though the heroine is threatened and even injured by the assault, she’s still in control of herself and the situation. She doesn’t fight the villain; she even plays along so she can get him into position to be taken out by the candlestick-wielding maid.

In her category romantic suspense *High-Heeled Alibi*, Sydney Ryan shows a contemporary heroine defending herself against a couple of very bad guys:

Holding her bound wrists, the gorilla nudged her forward. ... The creep behind her was so close, she could feel his erection pressing into her. Her wrists were bound behind her back, but her feet were free.

The thug gripping her arms released one to open the car door. As he pushed her in, she aimed her spiked heels at his groin and got off a couple good shots to his shins. ...

“You wanna play rough?” He came at her, his shaved head ducking her flailing feet. His hand came up, struck her hard once, twice. Her head whipped right and left. Her brain

rattled.

“Cut out the social niceties,” the other man growled as he slid into the driver’s seat. “There’ll be plenty of time for that later.”...

She gingerly prodded with her tongue several teeth loosened by the blows. ...

She squirmed against the tight muscles in her upper back, and there, on her right hip she felt it—the barest weight of thin metal. The scalpel still in her lab jacket pocket. ... Carefully, staring straight ahead, her clasped hands began pulling the right side of her jacket behind her, quarter inch by quarter inch, until she felt the scalpel beneath her fingers like a magic wand.

“What do you want with me?” She twisted in her seat and stared boldly at the mound of a man next to her. But all her focus was concentrated *on* the small of her back, where her wrists met and rubbed, soundless millimeter by millimeter, against the blade of the scalpel.

...

The scalpel sliced through the last filament of wire. Her wrists were free.

Ryan’s heroine is a very cool customer, and the villains aren’t quite real-life thugs; when it comes right down to it, they’re more talk than action. Still, showing the heroine freeing herself helps offset the high level of violence in this scene.

Violence occurring between the hero and heroine is a particularly difficult issue for the modern romance writer. As society becomes more aware of the dangers of domestic violence, some of the action that was considered acceptable in romance novels in the past takes on a dark and uncomfortable aura. So-called bodice rippers sometimes included the rape of the heroine by the hero, but modern readers find it difficult to believe that a heroine could ever find happiness with a man who abused her, no matter how logical the author’s reasoning or how true to the historical period the action may be.

Rape is only incidentally about sex; it’s much more about power and control. Many a past romance novel—and a few current ones—excuse a violent or coercive hero by saying that love for the heroine drove him to his actions. But today’s authors—whether they are writing historical or contemporary stories—must think carefully about whether the action they are portraying indicates love or abusive control.

THE SPECTRUM OF LOVE SCENES

Just to show the wide range of love scenes and story types, here are a number of love scenes from various categories and kinds of romance novels, starting with the least explicit (inspirational) and moving to the most explicit (erotica).

These scenes are examples, not illustrations of what a particular category of love scene should be. Not only do the types of books differ in their sensuality, language, and approach to lovemaking, but each author within a category or type of romance will make her own love scenes unique.

Inspirational

In her historical inspirational *Chloe*, Lyn Cote shows a heroine who’s not only

personally inexperienced but also lacks general knowledge about the whole subject of lovemaking:

The mystery of what intimacies a wedding night entailed loomed before her and uncertainty sluiced through her like ice water. "Theran..."

He came up behind her and wrapped his strong arms around her, nuzzling her neck. "Don't be afraid of me, Chloe. I'd never hurt you."

"I know that." But her voice sounded low and slid over her throat like splintered wood. "I'm going to lie down and turn my back to you. ... I'll be waiting, dearest, but take your time."

A problem presented itself. Her mother still insisted Chloe wear an old-fashioned corset that laced up the back—she said it was the mark of a lady to need a maid to dress herself. But ... there was only Theran.

Like a naughty child, she tiptoed over to the side of the bed where he lay. "Theran," she whispered, "I need you to loosen my corset laces." Her face burned. She was afraid he'd say something bold and embarrassment would kill her.

He said nothing. But the bed springs creaked as he sat up behind her. Then he tugged her gently and made her sit down on the bed. ... She felt him untie the laces and then slowly stretch them, crisscross by crisscross, his fingers brushing her spine. ...

Before she could rise, Theran kissed the back of her neck and drew her back against him. "Don't go away, my sweet bride," he murmured. "Stay with me."

She didn't move, her breath suddenly difficult to find. As he kissed her neck and held her spine to his chest, she felt their skin touch and she quivered with the sensation. Slowly, he turned her and drew her up beside him—so close she could hear his heart beating. Or was it hers?

"Trust me," he whispered and she put her arms around his neck and sighed with his kisses.

Cote uses the corset as a metaphor for Chloe's release from the constraints of girlhood to the freedom of a married woman, through the loving help of her new husband.

In her contemporary inspirational *Promise of Forever*, Patt Marr shares a simple kiss from the point of view of the hero:

He touched her face, and she leaned her cheek into his hand, closed her eyes and rubbed the corner of her mouth against his palm. It was such a little thing, but it gave him the courage to take her face in both of his hands. "Sometimes I wonder..." "You wonder...?" Her eyes were on his mouth.

"I wonder what it would feel like ..." He lowered his face towards hers slowly, giving her plenty of time to push him away.

But she didn't. She held his shoulders and raised her lips to meet his. The touch of her mouth on his was as sweet as he'd dreamed of. It was just one soft touch, then another.

Her arms stole around his neck, and she touched her cheek against his jaw before sliding her lips back to his mouth.

He'd known what it was like to be married and loved, but had he ever felt quite like this?

In this example, a kiss isn't the start of something hotter—but this kiss changes the hero's view of his life.

Inspirationalists tend to have virgin heroines and very little physical expression of love between the characters, often confining the hero and heroine to a chaste kiss in the last few pages. Heroes and heroines in inspirationals do not make love, or even seriously contemplate making love, unless they're married. Even when heroes and heroines are married, love scenes are not described in detail.

Sweet Traditional

In this selection from my sweet traditional *The Corporate Marriage Campaign*, I show a heroine who has made a rational decision to make love with the hero despite her belief at that moment that their relationship—though special—is not a lasting one and will not lead to marriage:

He curved an arm around her waist, pulled her down onto his lap and kissed her long and deeply. She had practically melted by the time he was finished, and any doubt she'd had

about the rightness of what she was doing had faded into oblivion. Tomorrow, next week, or in thirty days—when it would all be over—she might regret this. But not now.

He held her an inch away from him. "Maybe I should ask ..." He sounded breathless.

She looked straight at him. "Yes, Trey, I really want to make love with you."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it. But that wasn't what I wanted to know."

She felt just a bit dizzy and she was having trouble sitting up straight. "Fine time to get curious. What is it?"

"I just need to know if you're being a praying mantis or a black widow spider."

She smiled. "Neither. You said yourself I'm a rattlesnake."

"Well, that's a relief—since rattlesnakes don't consume their mates after making love."

"Though I suppose there's a first time for everything," she murmured.

"Then I guess I'll just have to make sure you're otherwise satisfied."...

He carried her into the bedroom, and Darcy stretched out luxuriously on the bed and reached up for him as he shed his jeans and disposed of her T-shirt. "I have to tell you, Trey, that wasn't much of a chase you led me on there."

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't want you to be too exhausted to catch me." He slid under the sheet next to her. "Or, for that matter, in need of nourishment afterward."

And then the silliness gave way to tenderness and nurturing, to exploring and enjoying, and finally to soaring and crashing on the tide of passion.

In a sweet traditional, the focus of the love scene stays above the waistline (some would say above the neck). Though heroes and heroines can make love without being—or expecting to be—married, they do not do so without a sense that the relationship is very important. When included, lovemaking scenes are not explicitly described and are generally limited to intercourse.

Long Contemporary

In this section from her long contemporary *Almost a Family*, Roxanne Rustand shows a slightly more explicit style of love scene, with more details and a wider range of actions for the lovers:

Erin savored the exquisite pleasure of Connor's mouth on hers. The sensual slide of his hands on her back. The way he cradled her head to angle in for a deeper kiss that sent shivers skipping down her spine, and made her feel empty and wanting in her most intimate places.

And he didn't rush to the next step as if he had a plane to catch. In wonderment, she felt him hold back, explore, his eyes hot and dark and possessive as he groaned with pleasure at her own rising response. And he talked to her ... whispering hot, sexy words in her ear, making her feel as if she were the most desirable woman he'd ever known, until she was nearly engulfed in white-hot desire, wanting more, needing more.

When he finally drove into her, everything inside her turned to a fire that consumed her, body and soul. "Connor," she breathed.

And then an exquisite rush of pleasure swept her away.

Though the long contemporary has room for more development of the sexual side of the relationship, lovemaking is still not described in explicit language. Notice that though Rustand says the hero is whispering hot and sexy words, precisely what he says isn't included, and in this case body parts aren't named.

Short Contemporary

In *The Desert Virgin*, Sandra Marton shows her hero satisfying the heroine in alternative ways:

She tilted her chin up. Her lips parted. Her mouth clung to his and he felt his blood thunder in his ears.

“I’m going to bathe you now, Salome.”

... Gently, he lifted her from his lap and stood her between his legs. Then he reached for one of the washcloths stacked on the tub’s ledge. ...

“First your face,” he whispered. “And your throat.” She closed her eyes. ... Slowly, he ran the cloth over her breasts. He felt her tremble. He was trembling, too, as he took the cloth lower, over her belly, lower, lower ...

The cloth fell from his fingers. He bent his head, kissed her breasts as he slipped his hand between her thighs. She whimpered and his touch lingered, centered on that one forbidden place.

“That feels ...” Her head fell back “That feels ...”

“Does it?” His voice was raw. His body was on fire. “How does it feel, Salome?”

She sighed. He increased the friction. Warned himself that this was only for her. For her. Not for him. Not for—

Her cry rose into the night. Pleasure, fierce and elemental, rushed through him. He had done this. Given her this.

A feeling so deep, so intense it terrified him shot through his heart.

Quickly, he got to his feet. Lifted his golden dancer in his arms. Stepped from the tub with her clinging to his neck, with his mouth drinking from hers. Gently, he set her on her feet. Wrapped her in an enormous towel.

Then he kissed her again, lifted her again. Carried her from the bathroom to the bed, where he laid her down as carefully as if she were the most precious treasure in the universe.

“Don’t leave me,” she whispered.

Never, he thought fiercely. He would never leave her again.

Short contemporary is the most explicit of the category romances, allowing more freedom of language and alternative forms of sexual expression. Most

short contemporary romances include at least one episode of sexual intercourse and often involve oral sex as part of an extended love scene. This scene from Marton’s book ends without the couple actually having intercourse, but they stop short not out of reluctance but because they don’t have a condom.

Chick-Lit

The chick-lit heroine is one of the more liberated heroines in romance fiction, and she's just as sassy about sex as she is about everything else, as in this example from Claire Cross's *Third Time Lucky*.

He eased into me, hot and thick and hard, even as I tried to catch my breath. He held me against the wall with his hips as I got used to the size of him, then impatiently tugged my nightgown over my head and chucked it across the room.

He looked down at me and smiled, his admiration unmistakable. "Beautiful," he whispered. "And don't let anyone tell you differently." "Lots to love," I said, trying to make a joke.

Nick shook his head. "Perfect." He cupped one of my breasts in his hand, meeting my gaze, his palm fitted exactly around me. "See?"...

I'm not too clear how things proceeded after that, save that it's true what they say—all things do come in threes. Including me.

Note that, despite her smart mouth, this heroine is uneasy about her body and uncertain whether the hero can really be attracted to her—this level of self-esteem is typical of a chick-lit heroine.

Some chick-lit is even less explicit, with love scenes like this one from Sophie Kinsella's *Confessions of a Shopaholic*.

Last night was absolutely ... Well, let's just say it was ...

Oh, come on. You don't need to know **that**. Anyway, can't you use your imagination? Of course you can.

By not giving details, the first-person narrator invites the readers to give rein to their own fantasies, which draws them further into the story.

Single Title

In *The Kitchen Witch*, Annette Blair shows a heroine who is liberated, experienced, and anything but passive, and a hero who's determined to make their lovemaking a special occasion:

"Oh," she said, still focused on the nest of his arousal. "Just let me feel all that nice soft black cotton ... and everything." She stroked him through the briefs, took him from his cocoon and into her greedy hands, and turned him into her submissive slave. She handled him with gentle reverence, kneading and nuzzling with fingers and lips, growing him, breath by gasping breath, stroking him against her cheek, nibbling with her lips, until he got so close to coming, he took her down on top of him.

"So much for making it last," he said as he slid into her, in one fast, incredible thrust. ...

She came almost at once, making him slick, easing his heaving way. When he caught his breath, when they both did, he rolled her to her back, still inside her, and rose over her. "That's one," he said.

"More," she said arching, pulsing tight around him as if to help.

“Greedy,” he said, rising to the occasion and going for two, pretty certain that giving her as many orgasms as she wanted, before his turn came, would about kill him.

Though single title romance can veer fairly close to erotica, as in this example, it doesn’t necessarily include any explicit lovemaking at all.

Erotica

In *One Wilde Weekend*, Janelle Denison pulls out all the stops, initiating her hero and heroine into the Mile-High Club in a steamy scene in an airplane restroom.

He skimmed his palms along the satin-soft skin of her inner thighs, letting the hem of her skirt pool around his wrists as he glided higher and higher toward his final destination. Once there, his long fingers delved between her nether lips, finding her hot and wet and ready for him. ...

With her hips tilted at just the right angle for him, he slid his rod through her drenched curls from behind, found the entrance to her body, and with a hard, deep thrust, he buried himself to the hilt. Dana’s mouth opened in a silent gasp, and though he knew he ought to be just as discreet considering where they were, there was no stopping the primitive male groan that erupted from his chest. ...

As he plunged and withdrew in a building, gyrating rhythm, he swept her hair aside and nuzzled her neck with his lips, his ragged breathing warm and damp against her skin. He used one hand to caress her breasts and lightly pinch her nipples, while his other hand dipped low to where they were joined. His fingers stroked her cleft in that knowing way that never failed to make her come, and it didn’t take long for her breath to catch in the back of her throat and for him to feel the clench and pull of her body around his cock that signaled an impending climax. Hers and his.

He drove inside her one last time, high and hard, lodging himself as deeply as he could get just as the plane rumbled through an air pocket ... she inhaled a quick breath then moaned softly, her entire body convulsing in a long, continuous orgasm that milked him dry.

In erotica, love scenes are frequent and explicit, starting right at the outset and building in intensity throughout the story. Though body parts are named more freely than in other types of romance, there’s a tendency to use slang (*rod, cock, nether lips, cleft*) rather than clinical terms such as *penis* and *vagina*.

No matter what variety of romance, how explicit the scene, or how experienced or inexperienced the lovers, sex in romance novels is always better than average and usually of medal-winning caliber. Heroes always make sure their heroines are satisfied, even virgins are always ready for the next round, and everybody climaxes every time they make love.

But the most important thing of all about love scenes in romance novels is that heroes and heroines don’t just have sex. In fact, they cannot simply have sex—*they make love*.

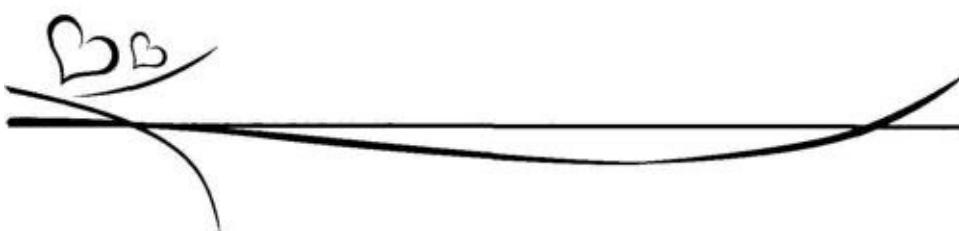


1. Flip through the romance novels you've been studying, looking for sexual tension and love scenes. Do the love scenes in the books you've read include intercourse, or is the lovemaking restricted to touches and kisses?
2. How do the authors use touch to build sexual tension?
3. At what point in each book is the first love scene?
4. If there is more than one love scene, how does the author build anticipation for later scenes?
5. Choose a love scene and consider how the same level of intimacy might be presented in a different romance subgenre.



Creating Sexual Tension and Love Scenes in Your Work

1. What sort of romance novel do you envision writing? What level of physical contact and expression is appropriate for that subgenre?
2. How can you build sexual tension between your main characters?
3. What level of intimacy is appropriate in love scenes between your main characters, considering their past experience and current situation?
4. How explicit should your love scenes be, considering the type of romance you're writing?
5. What images would come to your main characters' minds as they touch, kiss, or make love?



chapter eleven

Using Point of View



Point of view is the vantage point from which you observe an event or a person or a situation. In fiction, point of view (POV) refers to the unique angle from which the story is told. The POV character is the character through whom readers get their information about story events and other characters.

In romance novels, the POV character is nearly always one of the main characters—the hero or the heroine. Using the POV of the hero or heroine allows the readers to not only

see what's going on but to understand how those events affect the characters.

The unique way in which a character, at one precise moment in time, views the situation is called *perspective*. As an author, you convey that unique vision to the readers by sharing the character's thoughts, emotions, and reactions to what's happening around her.

Every character has an opinion and a unique way of expressing it. One person will see rain and think of gloom and sadness, while another will see rain and think of cleanliness and renewal. The rain in this case is exactly the same—only the POV and the perspective have changed. But the way you, as the author, tell the readers about the rain will be different depending on which of those two people is your POV character. If the character is feeling gloomy, you may emphasize the torrents of water beating down, the darkness of the clouds, the sharp scent of ozone. If the character's feeling hopeful, you may emphasize the plants standing up as if under a refreshing shower, the contrast between the rich gray color of the sky and the brilliant green of the new-washed grass, and the scent of clean air. Both sets of elements are present in the rainstorm, but the things you choose to emphasize help the readers understand and share the character's feelings.

WHAT THE CHARACTER SEES

Normally in fiction the POV is that of one or more characters, not of the author. So the information the readers receive will be influenced by what the character knows, sees, observes, feels, and thinks. The information conveyed will involve not only facts (such as who is in the room) but opinions (whether the character likes or dislikes those people). The character's attitudes and her perspective will be different from yours, the author's, because the character doesn't know everything you know (what other characters are planning or thinking, or what's going to happen next).

If the POV character doesn't see something happen, the readers won't see it, either. You will know what's going on behind the character's back, but the readers can only know what the POV character knows.

If you're confused about the difference between first person and third, between omniscient and selective, you're not alone. There are many varieties of POV; here are some examples to help you sort them out. Not all of these variations are used in romance novels, but it's useful to understand their differences.

- **First person includes the thoughts and perspective of one main character who's telling her own story.** This POV is widely used in chick-lit and woman-in-jeopardy books. A first-person romance novel is usually told from the heroine's POV

As I walked up the hill, I realized that the atmosphere was just too quiet. There was no sound from the cardinal who was nearly always singing from the top of the maple tree. I thought I saw a shadow move high up on the slope, but when I looked again it was gone. Still, I shuddered as I felt a silent threat pass over me like a cloud over the sun.

- **Second person turns the reader into the character.** This POV is seldom used in fiction, appearing in the occasional literary novel. It's almost never found in romance novels.

As you walk up the hill, you realize that the atmosphere's just too quiet. There's no sound from the cardinal you know is almost always singing from the top of the maple tree. You think you see a shadow move high up on the slope, but when you look again it's gone. You shudder as you feel a silent threat pass over you. You feel cold, like a cloud just passed over the sun.

- **Third-person selective/singular includes the thoughts and perspective of just one main character, but unlike in first person, that character is not telling her own story.** The pronouns referring to the POV character are not I and *me* and *my*, but *she* and *her*. This POV is often used in romance, though it is

less common now than before the 1980s to have just one character's thoughts revealed over an entire story.

As she walked up the hill, she realized that the atmosphere was just too quiet. There was no sound from the cardinal she so often heard singing from the top of the maple tree. She thought she saw a shadow move high up on the slope, but when she looked again it was gone. Nevertheless, she shuddered as she felt a silent threat pass over her. It felt like a cloud creeping over the sun.

- **Third-person selective/multiple includes the thoughts of more than one main character, but presents only one POV at a time.** This is the most widely used POV in romance novels. A scene break (a blank line, or crosshatches or asterisks placed on an otherwise blank line) indicates a change from one POV to the other; in a romance, the scenes would likely be much longer and more fully developed than in this example:

As she walked up the hill, she realized that the atmosphere was just too quiet. There was no sound from the cardinal she so often heard singing from the top of the maple tree. She thought she saw a shadow move high up on the slope, but when she looked again it was gone. Nevertheless, she shuddered as she felt a silent threat pass over her. It felt like a cloud creeping over the sun.

###

He saw her start up the hill, and he moved quickly behind the shelter of the huge old maple tree. If she saw him now, everything would be ruined, but if he could stay hidden until she came within range—well, then she'd have to talk to him. Wouldn't she?

- **Third-person dual includes the thoughts of two or more main characters, and switches back and forth within the scene.** It's also widely used in romance, though it's most effective when the switch between the points of view happens only occasionally—every few pages, at most—rather than with every paragraph, as in this example:

As she walked up the hill, she realized that the atmosphere was just too quiet. There was no sound from the cardinal she so often heard singing from the top of the maple tree.

He saw her start up the hill, and he moved quickly behind the shelter of the huge old maple tree. If she saw him now, everything would be ruined.

She thought she saw a shadow move high up on the slope, but when she looked again it

was gone.

If he could just stay hidden until she came within range, he thought, then she'd have to talk to him. Wouldn't she?

She shuddered as she felt a silent threat pass over her. It felt like a cloud creeping over the sun.

- **Third-person omniscient** includes an all-knowing narrator who can relay the thoughts and perspective of all characters, as well as general comments about the story. It's rare that the thoughts of *every* character are included, but in omniscient, they can be. It's frequently used in literary fiction, but rarely in romance.

As the girl walked up the hill, she realized that the atmosphere was just too quiet.

The cardinal tipped his head back and drew breath to sing, but just as the first note passed his beak he heard the crack of a dead branch far below his perch high in the maple tree. Startled, he looked down, cocking his head to one side and watching with great interest while the man rattled the blades of grass as he tried to hide himself behind the tree.

As the man saw her start up the hill, he moved quickly into the shelter of the huge old maple tree. If she saw him now, everything would be ruined.

She thought she saw a shadow move high up on the slope, but when she looked again it was gone.

The man thought if he could stay hidden until she came within range, she'd have to talk to him. Wouldn't she?

The girl shuddered as she felt a silent threat pass over her. It felt like a cloud creeping over the sun.

- **Third-person detached** includes only actions, with no thoughts. It's used in screenplays (the viewer cannot eavesdrop on the characters' thoughts), but it's seldom used effectively in romance. Inexperienced romance authors often start out using a very detached POV; telling about events but not sharing the characters' reactions or thoughts—which keeps the readers at a distance from the story and characters.

The girl walked up the quiet hillside.

In the top of the maple tree, the cardinal tipped his head back and drew breath to sing. A dead branch cracked on the ground below the bird's perch.

The man stepped on the branch and rattled the blades of grass as he moved behind the tree. He watched the girl come up the hillside toward him.

Her gaze shifted quickly and warily from one shadowy area high on the slope to another, and she shuddered.

- **Author POV** relays the author's insider information about the story and characters. This POV creeps into many different types of books, and it's a far less effective way of telling a story than sticking to the character's thoughts and observations.

As Jill walked up the hillside, everything was quiet. She didn't see the bird in the top of the maple tree, and even when he started to sing, she couldn't identify the species. She'd never been as interested in birds as Jack was. He knew the song of a cardinal when he heard it, though he really wasn't listening because he was watching Jill come up the slope toward him instead.

If Jill had known he was waiting for her, she would never have come outside. She was afraid of running into him. But she didn't realize that her fear really came from when she was little and she'd been lost on a picnic one day. Even though she didn't remember, the experience still affected her. And since Jack didn't know about the incident, he didn't have any idea how much it was going to freak her out to find him there.

POINT OF VIEW AND ROMANCE

Now that you have a clear handle on all the different POV options available to you, take a closer look at those most common to the romance genre and its various categories.

Though chick-lit is often written in first person from the heroine's POV, the majority of romance novels use third person, and most modern romance novels convey the thoughts of both hero and heroine. Some authors use third-person selective/multiple, sharing the thoughts of just one character at a time and switching POV characters only when a new scene starts—which is the preferred approach in general fiction as well. Other authors use third-person dual, switching back and forth between the thoughts of hero and heroine within a scene.

The choice of exactly which POV structure to use depends not on the category but on your preference and the best way to tell the story.

First Person

The first-person narrator tells the readers what she sees, hears, thinks, feels, believes, assumes, and deduces. She doesn't share every single thought that crosses her mind—that would be more characteristic of stream-of-consciousness literary fiction, and it risks turning an interesting story into a self-absorbed, drawn-out, and very boring one. In first-person fiction, everything the readers know is related to them by the narrator. What the character doesn't know, the readers can't know, either.

Since the readers are in the mind of the heroine (only rarely is the hero a first-person narrator), they can't know what the hero is thinking or feeling. Your heroine/narrator may believe she's got him figured out, but she—and the readers—can't know for certain whether she's correct. The readers can hear what the hero says, see what he looks like, and draw conclusions from things like tone of voice, word choice, and slant of eyebrow. The readers' conclusions may not always agree with the heroine's, and there's no way to know who is right unless

the hero says so. And even then, the readers can't be sure that what the hero says is the whole truth. Because of all these unknowns, first person creates mystery and suspense for the readers.

The success of first-person stories depends on the personality of the narrator. If the main character is funny, breezy, and sympathetic, a friendly soul who doesn't show off or display false modesty, then she's likely to win the readers' hearts. If she yaks about how wonderful she is (or how smart, ugly, overweight, beautiful, depressed, well organized, or forgiving), if she dwells on unkind thoughts, or if she acts like a victim, then she's apt to place high in the contest for which heroine readers would most like to slap silly.

The difference between these two types of characters is very small. One reader will detest a character that other readers adore. (Bridget Jones, from Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, is a good example of a character readers either love or hate.)

The best first-person narrators are nice people despite interesting flaws. They're people you'd like to know better, people who amuse you rather than lecture you. They simply tell the story and let the readers deduce motives, explanations, and justifications on their own.

The least successful first-person narrators are constantly conscious of the readers—not only talking to them but justifying what they're doing, explaining, and assuming that their every thought will be of compelling interest.

Though chick-lit, hen-lit, and mom-lit are considered cutting-edge books, where POV is concerned, they're almost a throwback to early romances, which shared only the heroine's feelings and thoughts, leaving the hero a mystery.

In this example from Sophie Kinsella's chick-lit novel *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, notice the first-person heroine's observations of the man on the train. By dismissing his clothes as lower class, she's not only judging him but showing herself as shallow:

The tube stops in a tunnel ... Five minutes go by, then ten minutes. I can't believe my bad luck. ...

[U]ntil I've got that scarf in my hands I won't be able to relax.

As the train finally gets going again I sink into my seat with a dramatic sigh and look at the pale, silent man on my left. He's wearing jeans and sneakers, and I notice his shirt is on inside out. ... I take another look at his jeans (really nasty fake 501s) and his sneakers (very new, very white). ...

"They just don't think, do they?" I say. "I mean, some of us have got crucial things we need to be doing. I'm in a terrible hurry!"

"I'm in a bit of a hurry myself," says the man.

"If that train hadn't started moving, I don't know what I would have done." I shake my head. "You feel so ... impotent!"

"I know exactly what you mean," says the man intensely. "They don't realize that some of us ..." He gestures toward me. "We aren't just idly traveling. It matters whether we arrive or not."

"Absolutely!" I say. "Where are you off to?"

"My wife's in labor," he says. "Our fourth. ... How about you? What's your urgent

business?"

Oh God. ... I can't tell this man that my urgent business consists of picking up a scarf from Denny and George.

I mean, a scarf. It's not even a suit or a coat, or something worthy like that.

The heroine redeems herself—if only barely—by realizing that her own mission is hardly as important as his and by not continuing to whine about her own problems. Kinsella has carefully walked a fine line here; some readers will love the heroine's honesty, while others will find her so shallow and unsympathetic they'll be hoping for her comeuppance.

Third-Person Selective

In third-person selective, it's as if the person telling the story—the narrator—is sitting on the main character's shoulder, able to see and hear what the character sees and hears, but also able to eavesdrop on and report the character's thoughts and feelings. The narrator reports the actions of the characters using the words *he*, *her*, *their*, etc., to tell the story. If the main character is Jane, the narrator will refer to her with *Jane* or *she*.

Because of its close connection between narrator and character, third-person selective has almost as much immediacy and personal impact as first person, without being as constrained by the character's own deficiencies and prejudices. The narrator in this case is almost invisible, simply sharing the details and making no comment on the story.

Third-person selective means the readers see what the viewpoint character sees, hear what she hears, and know what she thinks (though not every single thought). Third-person selective includes only scenes in which the viewpoint character is present. If Jane walks out of the room, the readers walk out with her—so the readers can't hear what is said after Jane leaves, any more than Jane can.

The readers also know how the other characters look, see the actions they take, hear the exact words they say, and can draw conclusions about what they're thinking from Jane's observations of such things as facial expressions, tone of voice, etc. Because the readers see what's going on, they may draw different conclusions about events than Jane does. If Jane deduces from the look on another character's face that he's angry, the readers know what Jane's thinking—but they don't know for sure whether Jane is right.

In this example from Heather Graham's romantic suspense novella *Bougainvillea*, notice how the heroine's perceptions as she sits by her father's hospital bed are shared with the readers:

As Kit slowly awoke and opened her eyes, she saw a man standing in the doorway. He was very tall, and in the shadowy, dim light he at first appeared to be dark—and sinister. She had the uneasy feeling that he had been standing there, staring into the room in silence for a long time. Staring as she slept, making her feel oddly vulnerable.

His shoulders were broad beneath a heavy winter coat, and he seemed to stand very straight, with a great deal of confidence and assurance. She sensed that he wasn't watching her. He was watching her father. Waiting for him to die.

Kit blinked, and awkwardly tried to rise, wanting to demand to know who he was and what the hell he was doing. But when she blinked, he was gone. There was no man in the doorway.

Was there a man in the doorway? Was he sinister, threatening, confident, assured? Is he really waiting for Kit's father to die? Though Kit believes so, the readers—who have seen the evidence for themselves through the third-person POV—may or may not agree.

If you were using a third-person selective/multiple POV you might follow up a scene like this one with a scene from the POV of the man who was standing in the doorway, relaying his thoughts, feelings, actions, and reactions to Kit.

Third-Person Dual

Many authors want to include the thoughts of both main characters within a single scene—using a third-person dual POV. It seems logical that the readers need to know what both hero and heroine are thinking, so the author tells them what Jane says and what she's thinking, then shifts to John and what he's thinking, then back to Jane.

In the following example from her short contemporary novella *An Officer and a Gentleman*, Rachel Lee uses typographical tricks to make clear which POV we're in at any given instant, and because both characters are thinking similarly, the passage quickly and effectively shows us both characters' feelings.

Giving up on the newspaper, Dare carried his coffee into the living room and stared out the window at the bleak North Dakota winter morning. What had he done? What was he going to do about it? He'd acted like a damn—

—cowboy, Andrea thought as she walked into Dare MacLendon's office Monday morning. A damn cowboy. Her shoulders ached miserably, perfectly in tune with her mood. She still felt as if most of her energy had slipped down a black hole somewhere. Anger sustained her and drove her in to work, determined to show that damn cowboy just what he deserved for toying with her like that. She was going to—

—freeze him, Dare realized when his gaze met hers across the conference table that morning. The little minx gave him a look glacial enough to cause frostbite. While the other officers wandered into the room and poured themselves coffee, he met her stare for stare and allowed himself to imagine her lying naked and trembling on his bed, reaching out for him—

—touching his chest, Andrea thought, stroking her hands downward to grasp his buttocks and pull him—

—into her, Dare imagined, ... and reality returned with a crash. Major Francis was pulling out his chair at the far end of the table, the last one to arrive. Dare glanced around, taking attendance mentally. No one missing. "Good morning, people."

In this case, Lee is very successful at relating the two points of view while keeping them distinct and clear. By using this device, she also moves her story along rapidly, far more quickly than she could have using separate scenes from each main character's POV.

However, this example is an exception; the dual POV is seldom the best way to tell a story. When you rapidly switch back and forth from one character's POV to another's, the readers may feel like they're watching a tennis match, looking quickly from one player to the other and unable to concentrate on either. When readers are deluged with thoughts and feelings from both sides, it's harder for them to empathize with either character. Unless you are very skillful and careful, the readers may even be confused as to whose thoughts they're getting at any particular moment.

If you feel you cannot limit yourself to one POV character per scene, then you should switch from one to the other only when it's absolutely necessary to provide immediate access to the second character's thoughts. Such changes should not be frequent and should be made deliberately, not out of laziness or carelessness.

In this example from her romantic suspense novella *Capsized*, author Sharon Sala starts with the hero's POV then switches—clearly and strongly—to the heroine's, at the point where the heroine regains consciousness:

The woman was still shivering, despite the pile of covers Quinn had put over her. He knew he needed to get her warm, and the quickest way he knew how to do that was a hot bath. He ran the tub full of water, keeping it as hot as he dared. Hesitating only briefly, he slipped the T-shirt over her head, then carried her into the bathroom. Gently, he began lowering her into the tub, unprepared for any kind of protest. But when the water reached her knees, it obviously triggered a memory she would rather forget. She bucked in his arms, then began to thrash and moan. Before he knew it, she'd swung a fist in his direction. He ducked as she cursed and then swung again. . . .

“Lady . . . lady . . . it’s okay. I’m trying to help you, remember? You’re freezing cold. You need to get warm.”

She swung at him again and slung a long, shapely leg over the side of the tub, still trying to get out.

“Christ almighty!” Quinn said and, in disgust, just let her go. Unprepared for the sudden freedom, Kelly slipped and then sank beneath the water before coming up sputtering, still ready to fight. Only there was no one trying to push her head beneath the water or stick a knife to her throat—just a wet and rather disgusted looking man watching her from the doorway. . . .

And then Kelly remembered—everything from the knife sinking into Ortega’s chest to the stranger on the shore. He’d probably saved her life.

Sala couldn’t start with the heroine’s POV because she was unconscious; yet Kelly’s thoughts and fears when she does rouse are so important that it’s necessary for the readers to see them directly. So when Quinn lets go, we’re still in his POV (he’s feeling disgust), but in the next paragraph we’re in Kelly’s POV (she’s unprepared for him to drop her). Notice that since these two don’t yet know each other’s names, the narrator doesn’t use them in thoughts—when we’re in Quinn’s POV he refers to “the woman” and when we’re in Kelly’s POV she refers to “a wet and disgusted looking man.”

Another example of switching from one POV to another within a scene is the selection we read from Penny McCusker's *Noah and the Stork*, on page 115. McCusker starts off the scene in the heroine's head, but at the crucial moment when the hero comes face-to-face with his daughter, realizing for the first time that he has a child, she switches smoothly to his thoughts instead.

Using More Than One Character's Point of View

The use of more than one POV in a book—whether the POV switches between scenes or within a single scene—should not be an afterthought. If a character's thoughts are to be included anywhere in the story, you shouldn't wait until late in the book to begin; you should be fairly consistent from the start. It isn't necessary to assign an equal number of pages to each POV or to alternate POV with each scene, but the second POV shouldn't disappear for so long that the readers forget about it.

When using more than one POV in a book, always make the POV of the most important character more prominent. In a story shared between two points of view, the division should not be fifty-fifty. One (most often the heroine's) should dominate.

Dangers of Using More Than One Point of View

Frequently, when relaying more than one character's POV' it's tempting to tell the readers too much, too soon. If the main characters have no secrets from

the readers, it's harder to keep up the suspense level, particularly if the conflict isn't an exceptionally strong one. If the hero thinks the heroine is the girl of his dreams, and the heroine thinks the hero is Mr. Right, and the readers know that up front, what's going to keep them reading?

Another danger of using multiple points of view is the tendency to use the characters' thoughts as a substitute for actual verbal confrontation between the characters. It's tempting to show the heroine's angry thoughts about the hero, then switch to show the hero's angry thoughts about the heroine. But it's much more effective to make the two of them actually fight their battles face-to-face.

Secondary Characters' Points of View

Relating a scene from the POV of a secondary character should be done with great caution. Long books with strong subplots can benefit from an occasional scene told from a secondary character's POV, but shorter books don't allow much room for such a luxury.

The rule of thumb, with rare exceptions, is that if a main character is present, then the POV should be that of the main character. So if the heroine is talking to her masseuse, readers get the heroine's thoughts, not the masseuse's. Use the secondary character's POV only if that person is the most important character in the scene.

In Roxanne Rustand's long contemporary *A Montana Family*, Lily is an important secondary character—the hero's daughter, who's fourteen and facing a health crisis that has her scared out of her mind:

Ninety-six pounds. Fear washed through Lily as she stepped off the scale on Monday

morning before school. A month ago she'd been a hundred-five. Two weeks ago, on the day she'd started school here, she'd been a hundred.

Her knees shaking, she braced her hands on the bathroom sink and stared at the hollows of her cheeks and the violet shadows under her eyes. Most of the other kids in middle school grew a lot at her age. She'd seen those changes in neighborhood friends back home.

Mom got thin before she died.

Lily sank onto the edge of the bathtub and wrapped her arms around her waist. The scared feeling was in her stomach all the time now, making her want to scream and run, or hide under the blankets and not even get out of bed each morning.

Maybe I have cancer too. But telling Dad how she felt, going to a doctor, might make it all too real. I don't want to know. I don't want to know.

Fragments of last night's dream floated back. The way Mom's beautiful face had turned yellow, her skin felt like tissue paper. The way her shiny dark hair had fallen out in tufts until she'd looked like an old, worn doll at a garage sale. ...

Lily stood up—too fast, because a wave of dizziness nearly sent her to the floor.

And then she prayed that she wasn't going to die.

The first choice when you need to share a secondary character's thoughts is to have the character speak them aloud, to have the character talk to the hero or heroine. Here, Rustand could have stayed in the heroine's POV by having Lily talk to the heroine, telling her about her fears. But in this case, Lily's scared out of her mind—unlikely to confide in anyone because voicing her fears would make them even more frightening—so a dialogue would be illogical. The most effective way to share what's going on inside her is to let the readers overhear her thoughts directly.

If you choose to use the viewpoint of a secondary character, make those scenes short and to the point. (Lily's entire scene—not all of it is quoted here—is less than three hundred words, just under a page long.) If the secondary character is important enough to have a POV at all, then she should appear with some regularity—perhaps in a half-dozen short scenes during the story.

But keep in mind that going into the head of a secondary character can pull the readers' attention from the main story. It can be a danger sign, indicating that your main story is dragging and you're trying to fill pages while waiting for the action to heat up again. Or your main characters may have bogged down, and the secondary ones have become more interesting. If the heroine's friend's thoughts are more interesting than the heroine's, perhaps the story is really hers—and she should be the main character instead.

HANDLING POINT OF VIEW

Choose a viewpoint character at the start of each scene. In the first paragraph or two of the scene, in addition to establishing where and when the action is taking place, be sure to tell the readers who the main character is in this part of the story—whose thoughts they

will be getting.

That can be done in a variety of different ways:

- **Through a thought.** “Until that morning, Hannah had started to think it didn’t matter what hour of the day or night she walked Mrs. Patterson’s dog.”
- **Through a sensation.** “Within two hours of arriving at work, Hannah was beginning to feel as if she’d been buried alive in the law library.”
- **Through an emotion.** “Hannah was steaming, too agitated to sit still.”
- **Through an action.** “Cooper tugged at his bow tie and impatiently straightened the pristine white cuffs of his formal shirt.”
- **Through a comment about another character.** “Wherever Cooper had gone that morning, it wasn’t far enough for Hannah’s taste.”

The Dreaded Wandering Point of View

Whether you intend to use just one POV or several, it’s easy to let more than one character’s thoughts creep into your scene. You have to know as you write what each character is thinking at that moment (even when you’re not using her POV), because what the characters are thinking will affect what they say and do. Because you know what they’re thinking, it’s very natural to slip up and include those thoughts. Sometimes you aren’t even aware that you’ve wandered from the head of the viewpoint character into that of another.

Drifting from one POV to another can happen so subtly that the lapse sneaks by even the most alert of authors. You don’t need to write “Jane thought” in order to include Jane’s thoughts. If you write “Jane met Gina as she strolled down the sidewalk. It was good to see Gina taking better care of herself these days,” then you’ve included Jane’s thoughts on the subject of Gina’s grooming.

This classic example includes three points of view in a single sentence: “Greg looked genuinely horrified as his mind jumped to the same conclusion Cara was reaching.” (Can you find all three? The first is indicated by “Greg looked horrified”; since we can see his facial expression, we’re observing him from another character’s POV. The second POV is Greg’s, because we’re eavesdropping on his thoughts: “his mind jumped.” The third POV is Cara’s, whose thoughts we hear next: “the same conclusion Cara was reaching.” Triple play.)

The confusion that comes from a wandering POV is the reason behind the standard admonition to limit each scene to one viewpoint character. In order to change points of view, all you have to do is leave a blank line—a simple white space, or a few asterisks or crosshatches to make your intentions clear, as in the example on page 149 of third-person selective/multiple—and start a new scene. Then stick to the new POV character’s thoughts and feelings for the duration of that scene.

By choosing one POV character at the beginning of each scene, you can reap the benefits of dual POV—access to all the actions, thoughts, and feelings of two characters—

without confusing the readers or sacrificing the deep involvement with one character that keeps them reading.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT TENSE

While some literary fiction is written in the present tense (“She shouts at him”; “He drives the car off the bridge”), the majority of fiction is written in the past tense (“She shouted at him”; “He drove the car off the bridge”). Once you have selected present or past tense for the narrative, stick to it for the duration of the story; you don’t want to switch back and forth.

Most romance novels are written in past tense and in third person, though present tense is occasionally used in first-person stories like chick-lit. Writing

stories in past tense has become the convention because it makes sense. By the time something can be reported on by a narrator, it has happened, and so it *is* in the past—even if only by moments.

But not every line of a story should be framed in past tense. The current story (the narrative or the action) should be written in past tense, but the dialogue—the exact words spoken by the characters—should be phrased just the way a character would speak it—in most cases, in present tense, unless the character is discussing past or future actions.

And if a character is reflecting on something that happened to her yesterday or last week—before the current story—those events should be referred to in past perfect tense. Past perfect tense is great for making the action clear while showing that it’s not going on right now. The readers don’t have to struggle to figure out what’s happening now vs. what happened in the past. So if the heroine is washing dishes and thinking about an event she witnessed last week, the passage might go something like this:

Mechanically, she slid another plate into the soapy water, but she didn’t really see it. She was watching the picture in her mind, of another body of water. She was sure her memory wasn’t playing tricks on her. “I can still see it happening,” she murmured. George had simply pointed the car at the railing of the bridge and driven off it.

The events going on right now—the dishwashing, the remembering—are in past tense. The memory she’s picturing—the car going off the bridge as she watched—are in past perfect tense. The sentence she actually says is in present tense—the exact words, as she would speak them.

If you opt to use present tense for the main narrative of the story, then events occurring before the time of the current story should be related in past tense:

I slide another plate into the soapy water, but I’m not really looking at it. I’m watching the picture in my mind, of another body of water. I’m sure my memory isn’t playing tricks on me. “I can still see it happening,” I hear myself say. George simply pointed the car at the railing of the bridge and drove off it.

In this example from her single-title chick-lit novel *The Nine Month Plan*, Wendy Markham uses present tense for the main narrative, switching to past tense when talking about events that occurred earlier.

Nina Chickalini is no stranger to the tiny, windowless room just off the rectory of Most Precious Mother church on Ditmars Boulevard in Queens.

It was here that she made her first—and last—confession to Father Hugh. Make that, the *late* Father Hugh. But that part—the *late* part—wasn’t her fault, no matter what Joey Materi said then ... and continues to say.

This is a rare example of third-person present tense—a combination seldom used in romance novels. If the story had been structured in past tense, it would have started out: “Nina Chickalini was no stranger. ... It had been here that she had made her first ... confession. ...”

Failing to identify the viewpoint character, wandering from head to head, being unclear about whose thoughts the readers are getting—all of these things jolt your readers. Though they may not be able to define the shortcoming in your writing, they will automatically feel it, and this may destroy the magic of the story.

IN REVIEW: Surveying Point of View



1. Look at the romance novels you’ve been reading. Which characters’ points of view (thoughts, feelings) are included? How frequently does the POV change?

2. How many characters’ points of view are included in each scene?
3. Are the thoughts and feelings of secondary characters shared with the readers?
4. Does the author ever let you know what a non-POV character is thinking or feeling? How do you get this information?

Whose Point of View?

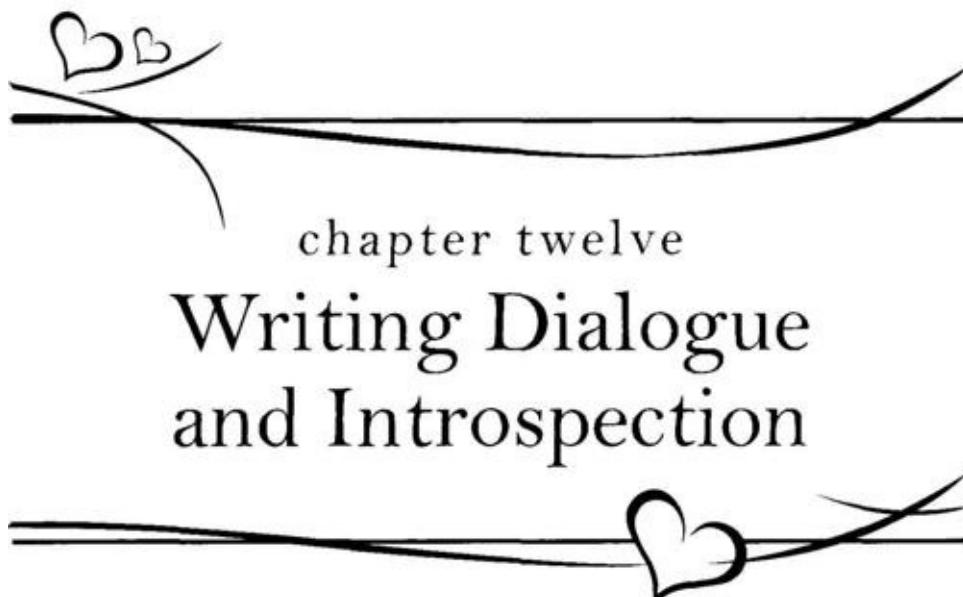


Sometimes the best choice for viewpoint character is apparent. At other times, the choice is less obvious, and asking some questions helps to clarify whose thoughts are most important for the readers at any particular moment in the story:

- Whose story is this? With whom do you want the readers to sympathize?
- What information is most important to the readers in this scene, and who possesses that information?
- Will the impact of that information on the readers be greater if they get it directly from the character who holds it, or if they’re taken off guard when the non-POV character shares her knowledge?
- Which character has the most at stake in this scene?
- Whose thoughts and reactions are most important?
- How can you best preserve any surprise or mystery that occurs in the scene?

Usually, the character who shows up most often in the answers to these questions is the best choice for a viewpoint character—but not always. Sometimes that character knows too much, and the shock value of a revelation is greatest when that information is

presented from the other character's POV.



chapter twelve

Writing Dialogue and Introspection

While plot is the bones of fiction—the structure on which the story hangs—dialogue is the story's flesh and blood. Good dialogue makes the story sparkle, move, come to life for the readers. Poorly written dialogue is like a pit full of quicksand, dragging the story down. And the differences between good and bad dialogue can be frighteningly small.

Dialogue can be important even before the readers start to absorb the story. It's one of the things readers of romance novels say they look at when they're selecting a book. Conversation catches the readers' attention, breaks up the dense pages of text, and makes the story look easy and fun to read.

Romance novels are a very personal kind of story, focusing on the development of an intimate relationship between a man and a woman. Dialogue between the hero and heroine is a particularly important tool for drawing in the readers and making them feel involved with the characters. When readers listen to what the characters say to each other—when the characters banter, when they argue, when they're whispering sweet nothings—the readers become wrapped up in the characters' world. In a sense, dialogue helps readers to become the heroine and fall in love with the hero, because they're right there in the midst of those most private conversations. When each individual reader feels like the only witness to what the characters are saying, how can she not feel involved in their lives?

An equally important part of the story is introspection—when the character shares his thoughts with the readers. Though introspection can be overdone (we'll talk more about how to handle a character's thoughts later in the chapter), eavesdropping on a person's thoughts is one of the best ways to get to know him—so this internal dialogue is every bit as important as what the character actually says.

DIALOGUE: BETTER THAN REAL SPEECH

Though real speech can be a good basic model for dialogue, the goal you're striving for is well above the mere reproduction of real speech.

Real speakers often break into each others' sentences, use slang and imperfect grammar, don't complete sentences or thoughts, and change subjects abruptly. They repeat

themselves and use fillers such as *umm*, *you know*, *uh*, and the like. Or, they start off a sentence without a clue of how they’re going to finish it, then wander all over the place. They use dialects, baby talk, accents, and nonstandard pronunciations. They often respond to another person’s statements with insubstantial and repetitive comments like “I see, yes, right.”

Good dialogue, on the other hand, is clear, crisp, logical, substantial, fast moving, and not repetitive. For the most part, it uses standard English spellings that our brains are trained to recognize on the page. Nonstandard or phonetic spellings that attempt to reproduce accents or dialects require the readers to figure them out, and even that momentary delay drags them out of the story.

Every line of dialogue should advance the plot or develop the character—ideally, it should do both. In its many functions, dialogue can:

- **Add immediacy to the story.** Through dialogue, the readers can feel as though they are actually present, watching the action. There’s a big difference between summarizing that “Sarah told John how hurt she felt” and sharing the actual dialogue in which Sarah blasts John with the details of how she feels and why.

- **Help to characterize.** What a character says can indicate his mood, disposition, or mentality more convincingly than any amount of description. Let’s say you have a character who says, “It’s a tough break that your mother is dying of brain cancer. I hope it doesn’t drag on long, because it’s a real nuisance for me not to be able to make plans.”

In just a few words, he’s shown the readers that he’s an arrogant, heartless, and self-centered jerk. Furthermore, because you’ve allowed the readers to make that judgment (rather than simply telling them the guy’s a jerk), you’ve drawn them further into the story.

- **Add humor.** Even in the darkest stories, in which slapstick or jokes would be inappropriate, a character can show graveyard humor in the way he talks, breaking the tension for a moment and leaving the readers refreshed and ready to be frightened all over again.

- **Explain action that the readers don’t actually see happening.** For instance, dialogue might mention events that are not important enough to show in their entirety but that the readers need to understand.

- **Describe a person, place, or thing.** One character telling another about what he’s observed is the most natural way there is to share this information.

- **Provide smooth transitions.** Having characters come and go in a particular setting, with each combination of characters talking about different matters, is an effective way to glide from one segment of a scene into the next.

- **Intensify conflict.** Telling the readers about the characters’ disagreements is less effective than letting the characters talk to each other—explaining the logic and reasons behind the particular standpoint each has assumed. As they listen to others’ suggestions, perhaps they modify their opinions, clarify what they’re thinking, come to a new understanding of their own feelings, or become even angrier.

In her medical romance *The Doctor's Rescue Mission*, Marion Lennox pits her heroine, the only resident doctor on a tsunami-ravaged island, against the hero, who's come to tell her the island will be deserted rather than rebuilt:

“Why would I ever want to be somewhere other than here?” she told him, her anger suddenly threatening almost to overwhelm her. “... I like having dated the island’s only two eligible men—and deciding they weren’t eligible after all. ... I like being on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and fifty-two weeks of the year. ... I like it that I’ll be stuck here forever. ...” Her voice broke.

“So if the island is declared unfit for habitation,” Grady said cautiously into the stillness, “you won’t be too upset?”...

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“The infrastructure’s been smashed. ... It’d be much cheaper for the government to pay for resettlement on the mainland. ... You don’t want to be here.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“I think you just did.”

“Well, I didn’t! ... I said I missed things. I do. ... But if I truly wanted to leave, you wouldn’t see me for dust. ... It’s not going to happen. We won’t all leave.”

In this brief conversation, the heroine goes from complaining about the isolation of her island home to defending it and swearing she won’t leave, because of the announcement the hero made.

- **Share backstory.** Making a character talk about the significant events in his past is more effective than simply telling the readers what his life has been like. Not only is the dialogue more interesting than straightforward telling, there’s an additional layer of emotion and suspense when the character himself shares events as he sees them. For instance, when you, as the author, tell the readers something, the readers assume you’re sharing everything of significance, so they can take the report at face value. But when the character himself tells the readers

something through dialogue, they are left to judge for themselves whether he’s telling them everything, and whether he’s actually being straightforward and truthful or if he might be deluding himself.

- **Foreshadow action, hinting at events that are yet to come.** Because the readers usually think of dialogue as the cotton candy that rewards them for standing in line at the carnival, they tend to take it less seriously than narrative—which makes dialogue an ideal place to slip in those necessary hints that make future story developments believable, without running up a red flag that shouts, “Here! This is a clue! Look carefully!”

READING DIALOGUE ALOUD

You must practice dialogue in order to become proficient. A good way to practice is to read your dialogue aloud, read it onto tape, or have someone else read it to you. Listen carefully to the cadence and the meaning.

If you have to stop to take a breath midsentence, the speech is too long, more like an after-dinner address than real conversation. If you can't get your tongue around a phrase, your readers will most likely also subconsciously note that it's awkward and unnatural to say.



THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES

Men and women talk differently. Men tend to talk about things, women about feelings. Men tend to speak in shorter bursts and shorter sentences. A woman asks more questions and is apt to pursue a subject even if it's clear her friend would rather not talk about it, while a man is more likely to let it drop.

While not every man and woman follow these conversational patterns, most do. Since the readers are used to these patterns in real life, they will be uncomfortable if characters stray from the norm. They may not know why, but they will know that the dialogue doesn't seem real.

Though making your characters sound real is important in all kinds of fiction, it's particularly important in romance. If the dame in a hard-edged mystery talks like a guy, it's easier for the readers to overlook—she's a less crucial piece of the action-oriented plot, and maybe she is just a hard-edged sort of person.

But since so much of a romance novel involves interaction between a man and a woman, a large percentage of the book portrays the two main characters talking to each other. If your romantic hero sounds like a girlfriend instead of a man, your readers will be dissatisfied even if they can't quite diagnose the reason why they don't like him.

By the time you start writing, however, your own gender-based conversational habits are already so ingrained that you've probably stopped noticing the differences in the ways men and women talk. That makes it difficult for you to create natural-sounding dialogue for a character of the opposite sex.

So here are the main ways in which real men and women differ when it comes to talking—and how your characters should differ if they're going to be convincing.

Status vs. Intimacy

In general, men approach conversation with an eye toward maintaining status and independence, reporting or obtaining information, and solving problems. Women seek to establish intimacy and rapport, share feelings, and build relationships.

Women ask questions to encourage interaction; men usually ask questions to get specific information. Men make more statements; women ask more questions.

Men say “I’m sorry” as an apology for a wrong they’ve done; women say “I’m sorry” to indicate regret or sympathy or concern over a situation, whether or not they played any part in causing it. Men rarely say “I don’t know,” and they seldom phrase ideas as questions, as in “Have you thought of ...?”

Men tend to make decisions, while women try to create consensus. Men tend to make demands, but women tend to express preferences, and women are more likely to volunteer their reasons for those preferences.

Men use shorter and fewer sentences; women use longer, more complex sentences and string more of them together. Men say something is blue; women say it’s robin’s-egg blue, or navy, or teal.

Men talk about actions or things; women talk about feelings. Men make declarations; women, even when they make a statement, tend to follow it up with a question. “Pizza is the best food on earth, don’t you think?” is a feminine sentence.

Women tend to phrase a preference or request as a question and then become annoyed at a negative response. When she says “Would you like to go out for dinner?” she really means she has no intention of cooking tonight. If her husband then answers the question he thought she was asking and says no, he’s going to be in the doghouse—and completely confused about how he got there.

Women tend to use euphemisms; men seldom do. A woman might say “I’m not at all pleased.” A man is more likely to say “I’m mad as hell.” Women are likely to express sympathy directly, men to joke or use playful put downs.

In this example from her single title *The Marriage Lesson*, Victoria Alexander shows her hero getting sympathy and advice from his friends:

“I am in love with her.” His voice held a touch of awe.

“It’s about time you realized it.” Rand grinned.

“And more to the point,” Pennington said, “she’s in love with you.”

“I’m in love with her,” Thomas murmured. “And she’s in love with me.” The truth struck him like a slap across the face. “Bloody hell.” He bolted upright and clapped his hand to his forehead. “That’s what she wanted to hear, wasn’t it? When she kept asking why I wanted to marry her? She wanted me to tell her I loved her.”

“I believe you said *fate*, at that moment,” Rand said wryly.

Pennington chuckled. “*Lord Witless* does seem more and more appropriate.”

Thomas groaned. “I have made a mess of it all.”

“It’s probably not too late to fix things.” Pennington sipped his drink. “She might well be amenable to listening to your abject apologies—”

“And declaration of love,” Rand said.

“And don’t forget groveling,” Berkley threw in. “Women *love* groveling.”

“In the morning,” Pennington continued. “After she’s had a chance to sleep on it. Life always looks better at the start of a new day.”

If the situation were reversed, the heroine’s friends might well make the same suggestions, but they’d do so in a much warmer and more empathetic manner.

Gender-Specific Dialogue

It’s difficult for a writer to create completely convincing dialogue for a character of the opposite gender. But you can make your dialogue more realistic by checking your dialogue against a list of the ways in which most writers go wrong.

If You’re a Woman

Here’s how to make your hero’s dialogue more true to gender if you’re a female writer:

- **Check for questions.** Men tend to request specific information, rather than ask rhetorical questions. If your hero’s questions can’t be answered with a brief response, can you rephrase them? Instead of asking questions at all, can he make statements?
- **Check for explanations.** Men tend to resist explaining; they generally don’t volunteer justification for what they do. If you need him to explain, can you give a reason why he must?
- **Check for feelings.** Men tend to share feelings only if stressed or forced; they’re more likely to show anger than any other emotion. They generally don’t volunteer feelings. If you need your hero to spill how he’s feeling, can you make it more painful for him to *not* talk than to share his emotions?
- **Check for details.** Men tend not to pay close attention to details; they don’t usually notice expressions or body language; they stick to basics when describing colors and styles. Can you scale back the level of detail?
- **Check for abstractions.** Men tend to avoid euphemisms, understatements, comparisons, and metaphors. Can you rephrase your hero’s dialogue in concrete terms?
- **Check for approval-seeking behavior.** Men tend to be direct rather than ask for validation or approval. Can you make your hero’s comments less dependent on what the other person’s reaction might be?

If You’re a Man

Here’s how to make your heroine’s dialogue more realistic if you’re a male writer:

- **Check for advice.** Women tend to sympathize and share experiences rather than give advice. Can you add empathy to your character’s reactions and have her talk about similar things that happened to her, rather than tell someone what he should do?
- **Check for bragging.** Women tend to talk about their accomplishments and themselves in a self-deprecating fashion rather than a boastful one. Can you rephrase her comments in order to make her laugh at herself?

- **Check for aggressiveness.** Women tend to be indirect and manipulative; even an assertive woman usually considers the effect her statement is likely to have before she makes it. Can you add questions to her dialogue, or add approval-seeking comments and suggestions that masquerade as questions?

- **Check for details.** Women notice styles; they know what colors go together (and which don't); and they know the right words to describe fashions, colors, and designs. Can you ramp up the level of specific detail?

- **Check for emotions.** Women tend to bubble over with emotion, with the exception that they're generally hesitant to express anger and tend to do so in a passive or euphemistic manner. If you need your heroine to be angry, can you give her a really good reason for yelling?

- **Check for obliviousness.** Women notice and interpret facial expressions and body language, and they maintain eye contact. If you need your female character to not notice how others are acting, can you give her a good reason for being detached?

Writing Realistic Dialogue



1. Eavesdrop (politely) as real people talk. How do two women speak to each other? How do two men speak to each other? How do a man and a woman speak to each other?

2. Can you guess the nature of each relationship? For instance, do you think the couple you've listened to is newly dating or long-married? On what evidence did you base your opinion?

3. Write a dialogue using what you've learned and applying the appropriate checklists from pages 167-168.

4. Read your dialogue aloud. Unnatural lines may hide on the page, but they tend to leap out when spoken.

5. Listen to someone else read your dialogue aloud. Better yet, get a man and a woman to read the appropriate parts. How do the lines sound? How do they feel to the speakers?

WHEN NOT TO TALK ABOUT SOMETHING

Dialogue is an important part of story-showing, but some writers allow their stories to be talked to death. Straightforward narration is sometimes a better way to handle information.

Here's a list of what *not* to do with your dialogue:

- **Don't talk about every single event.** Not every action that happens in your story is important enough to be talked about. Not every word that passes a person's lips is crucial to the story line. Showing two people talking about something as insubstantial as the weather occasionally serves a purpose—perhaps to illustrate how uncomfortable they are talking about anything else. But keep this kind of conversation brief, and always consider whether the talk is there for a reason or if it's just filling space.

In her short contemporary romance *Captive in His Bed*, Sandra Marton uses such

unimportant chat to illustrate how her hero's brothers begin their campaign to get the hero, Matthew, to talk about his troubles:

The brothers settled in their favorite booth and gave the waitress their order.

Alex commented on the weather. Cam commented on the traffic. Matthew made no comment at all.

Cam cleared his throat. "So ... how was Colombia?"

Note that the entire buildup to the real conversation is finished in a single paragraph, just sixteen words in all.

- **Don't substitute dialogue for action.** It's usually better to show an important event than to have two characters talk about it later. If a bomb's going off in your story, show us what the blast looks like, feels like, sounds like, smells like, tastes like. Don't skip to the next day and have your heroine tell her best friend how scared she was by the explosion.

- **Don't repeat dialogue.** If Harry and Fred have an important conversation, report it—but then don't show Harry telling Sue word for word what Fred told him. Summarize, or leave it out altogether.

- **Don't crowd the conversation.** Whenever possible, limit the number of characters involved in a conversation. Dialogue means, literally, an exchange between two people. While some discussions can involve groups, dialogue is easiest to handle and most effective when it involves only two. Isolate your characters. If necessary, take them off to a quiet corner of a crowded room. Sometimes the most effective arguments are those conducted in very low voices to keep from drawing the attention of others.

- **Don't convey data to your readers by showing characters exchanging information they have known for some time.** Showing an established member of a group explaining the rules to a new member makes sense, but two longtime members aren't likely to sit around the clubhouse *talking over the regulations*. The mother of one teenager isn't going to say to the mother of another teenager, "Your son John, who is seventeen, is coming to visit our son Stanley, who is almost

eighteen, for dinner tonight after football practice, which ends at seven p.m." Presumably, John's mother already knows her son's practice schedule, to say nothing of his name and age.

If you must give your readers information your characters already know, and you want to do it in dialogue, look for a natural way to express the facts. One woman might say to her friend, "I know you loved him, honey, but the man's been dead for six years!" She would not say, "The man you loved died six years ago." You've shared exactly the same information, but you've put an entirely different spin on the conversation.

In Marion Lennox's medical romance *The Doctor's Rescue Mission*, the author gives the readers important information about a medical condition by having her doctor-hero explain it to a young patient:

"I was the one who assessed your mother before she left," Grady was telling her. "..."

There didn't seem to be any intracranial swelling."

"Intracranial swelling?"

"Sometimes when people hit their heads they bleed into their brains," Grady told the girl. "... You open people's eyes and check their pupils. ... I shone a light into your mother's eyes and her pupils reacted just as they should. Also, her pupils stayed exactly the same as each other. That's a really good sign."

If Lennox's hero had explained the symptoms of a concussion to the heroine, who's also a doctor, the conversation would have been illogical and a waste of both professionals' time.

HANDLING DIALOGUE

Here are some basic guidelines for crafting solid dialogue between your characters—rules and techniques that will help keep your readers on track and in tune with your story:

- **Pace your dialogue to relate to the action**—long sentences for a slow and thoughtful scene, short and abrupt sentences at a time of action, tension, or suspense.
- **Always tell the readers there's a new character in the scene before that person speaks.** Remember that your readers can only see as much of the scene as you've painted for them. If they don't know a new character has come into the scene—if that person just starts speaking out of nowhere—the readers will be confused.
- **When writing a child's speech, do your research.** Listen to a child of the appropriate age until you can mimic his unusual speech patterns. A child moves through precise patterns of incorrect grammar in the development of perfect speech; your readers will be uncomfortable if you violate these patterns, even though they may not know exactly why. If your character is a very small child, consider paraphrasing most of what the child says and using only simple phrases in direct quotes. Doing so is tidier and easier to read.
- **Use slang with extreme caution.** Today's catchwords are almost guaranteed to be dated by the time a book is put into print. What is new and fresh in the center of the nation may already be dead on the coasts. If you must use slang, make sure that its meaning is clear from the context in which it's used and that it's appropriate to the historical period, the locality, and the character.

• **Don't even try to spell out a sound that is not a word.** It's much better to say

"She screamed" and leave the details to the readers' imagination than to try to reproduce the actual sound.

• **Avoid expletives and profanity.** As a rule, romances don't contain too much foul language. Inspirational romances contain none at all—ever. Most midrange romances stop at *hell* and *damn*, though single-title and chick-lit romances may indulge in the likes of *fuck*, *Christ almighty*, or *shit*. When considering the use of expletives

or profanity, keep in mind the characters and the circumstances—a professional woman is less likely to cut loose in her workplace than at a party or on the beach. And

remember that when words are written down on paper they're more emphatic than when they're spoken. While your hero probably wouldn't use *shucks* or *darn*, it's usually better to back down at least one step from what a real person would say in the same circumstances. Or avoid the problem altogether by writing "He swore," and let the readers mentally fill in whatever expression they wish—or whichever one shocks them.

- **When using foreign or unfamiliar words and phrases, translate.** Readers unfamiliar with the language may feel left out if they don't understand the reference and can't look it up easily. Look for ways to give the meaning in English without making your readers feel as if you think they're too ignorant to understand it on their own. In her short contemporary *Legally Tender*, Michele Dunaway gives a hand to the readers who don't understand Spanish:

Bruce walked up to one of the doors and knocked on the peeling paint. ... "Maria," he called. "Maria Gonzales. Me *llamo* Bruce Lancaster. Open the door. I must talk to you. Clara sent me."...

"Let me try," Christina said. ... "Maria! *Soy* Christina Jones, *la social de Bruce. Por favor abra la puerta. Le necesitamos hablar. Es muy importante.*" "What did you say?" Bruce asked.

"I told her I'm your partner and I asked her to open the door. It's important."

By setting the scene up this way, Dunaway must translate the phrases for Bruce—so the readers aren't made to feel dumb if they didn't get it on their own.

THE MECHANICS OF WRITING DIALOGUE

When it comes to formatting your dialogue on the page, there are a number of basic guidelines that can help you make clear to your readers exactly who's talking at any given moment. Here are the fundamental three:

1. Enclose the exact words of the speaker—a direct quote—in quotation marks. For instance:

He asked, "Will you help me?"

Only the exact words used by the speaker should be included in the quotation marks. If you're not using the exact words, summarize the sense of the sentence in narrative form and don't use quotation marks, as in the following indirect quote:

He asked if she would help him.

2. Begin a new paragraph every time the speaker changes, no matter how briefly each speaks.

Beth said, "Why?"

"Because it seemed the right thing to do, that's why."

3. Begin a new paragraph whenever you draw the readers' attention to a character other than the speaker, even if that person doesn't say anything.

Beth felt stunned. **Attributions**

Attributions let your readers know who is speaking. As the author, you know who's saying what—but your readers aren't going to be as closely attuned to your characters, and they can't read your mind. You owe it to the readers to make it as easy as possible to follow who is talking. Dialogue tags—the *he said*, *she said* phrases that specifically state who's talking—are, of course, the most obvious way to attribute dialogue.

Keep in mind that, contrary to what your third-grade teacher probably told you, there is nothing wrong with the verb *said*. In fact, since the eye tends to skip over the word, the readers get the meaning without being interrupted or jolted. *Said* is almost invisible on the page because the readers are so used to it.

Some other verbs, like *shouted*, *whispered*, and *murmured*, are just as useful because they tell the readers exactly how the sentence was expressed. Others, like *orated*, *gritted*, and *averred*, are annoying and intrusive. Verbs like *laughed* and *smiled* shouldn't be used in dialogue tags because one cannot smile or laugh words.

Adverbs added to *said* or to another attributive verb can be problematic. Many are useful in showing the precise way a sentence was spoken (*she said quietly*). But others are annoying (*he interjected grittily*), just plain silly [*she giggled girlishly*], or redundant (*he shouted angrily*).

The best method of attribution will depend on the situation, but using a variety of attribution techniques is a good way to keep your readers informed but not bored.

You don't need to identify the speaker with every single line of dialogue, especially if only two people are conversing. In fact, attributing every bit of dialogue by adding a dialogue tag or an action can quickly establish a sing-song rhythm that actually draws attention away from the conversation.

In addition to dialogue tags, there are a number of ways to clearly identify your speaker:

- **Start a new paragraph for each change in speaker.** As noted earlier, you should also start a new paragraph each time you want the readers' attention to

shift to a different character. If you include narration and dialogue in the same paragraph, the speaker and the person taking the action should be the same.

“Why?” Harry raised his eyebrows. “Because it seemed the right thing to *do*.”

If Harry doesn't speak both those sentences, the second speaker should be set off in a new paragraph.

- **Make the words themselves identify the speaker.** In a conversation between a man and a woman, if one of them says “Ever since I was a girl,” it's pretty clear who is talking.

- **Move the characters around the scene.** Including action in the dialogue tells the readers that whoever is acting in that paragraph is also speaking the words of dialogue, and it adds color and life to your story-showing.

- **Use the characters' gestures and body language.** Though the heroine who defiantly squares her shoulders and raises her chin has been overused to the point she's become a cliche, it's true that adding gestures and body language to the dialogue tells the readers who's talking and offers clues about what all the characters are thinking, even if their thoughts aren't being directly shared with the readers.

- **Have characters call each other by name.** Don't overdo this, though. In real conversations, most people rarely use first names other than to get someone's attention.

Keep in mind that if you overuse techniques like incorporating movement, gestures, and the use of names in your dialogue, you can end up making your characters look like clowns and distracting the readers from what's supposed to be an important conversation:

Julia scratched her nose. “Rod, *I* wanted to *talk* to you about Kim.” She shuffled *the* papers on her desk and found the letter she wanted.

Rod rubbed the back of his neck. “Go ahead, Julia.” He got up from his chair and started pacing the floor.

“It’s about her nanny, Rod.” Julia shook a paper clip from the holder and jabbed it through the letter she’d just finished printing. Then she held it up, looked at it, and nodded. “Yes. Now, as I was saying, Rod.” She pushed her chair back from the desk.

As *this made-up* example shows, adding more than one form of attribution per paragraph or speech simply gets in the way and slows the story to a crawl.

Julia Quinn is particularly gifted at creating effective dialogue, including this example from her Regency-period historical *When He Was Wicked*. In a society in which male—female friendships were limited *and certain topics simply weren’t* discussed, the heroine confides her desires to the hero, a long-term friend but not a lover, with predictable results:

“I beg your pardon?”

She’d shocked him. He was sputtering, even. She hadn’t made her announce *ment* to elicit this sort of reaction, but now that he was sitting there, his mouth hanging open and slack, she couldn’t help but take a small amount of pleasure from the moment.

“I want a baby,” she said with a shrug. “Is there something surprising in that?”

His lips moved before he actually made sound. “Well … no … but …”

“I’m twenty-six.”

“I know how old you are,” he said, a little testily.

“I’ll be twenty-seven at the end of April. I don’t think it’s so odd that I might want a child.”

His eyes still held a vaguely glazed sort of quality. “No, of course not, but—”

“And I shouldn’t have to explain myself to you!”

“I wasn’t asking you to,” he said, staring at her as if she’d grown two heads.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “I overreacted.”

He said nothing, which irritated her. At the very least, he could have contradicted her. It would have been a lie, but it was still the kind and courteous thing to do.

Finally, because the silence was simply unbearable, she muttered, “A lot of women want children.”

“Right,” he said, coughing on the word. “Of course. But … don’t you think you might want a husband first?”

In this example, Quinn uses attribution (“he said,” “she mumbled”), actions (“His lips moved”), silence (“He said nothing”), adverbs (“he said, a little testily”), and paragraphing (alternating paragraphs between the two characters) to make clear who’s talking at any given time. If there is any possibility for doubt about who’s speaking, as in the next-to-last paragraph, which falls after a long silence, Quinn tells us who’s talking.

STYLES OF DIALOGUE

Though Julia Quinn’s *When He Was Wicked* is a historical novel, the subject and tone of the dialogue has a contemporary feeling. Move the characters to a present-day setting and they could have essentially the same conversation—and that’s true of much dialogue across the range of romance novels. People talk about much the same things, whether it’s the thirteenth century or the twenty-first.

In other ways, however, dialogue in various kinds of romance differs. Historical romances are more likely to use the dialect and slang of the time, and in those cases it’s very important to be sure the readers can pick up the meaning of the words from the context, as in this example from Elizabeth Boyle’s historical single title, set in 1801, *This Rake of Mine*:

“Well,” Lady Oxley huffed, “I suppose there are worst things than having some *cit*’s daughter marry into your family, but for the life of me, I can’t think of it. Our bloodlines will be tainted by this forever.”

The Duchess of Cheverton, seated next to Lady Oxley, couldn’t agree more. “I fear for your standing, my dear, I do, indeed.”

“If there is some consolation, she did go to Miss Emery’s,” Lady Oxley conceded, though grudgingly.

“Miss Emery’s, you say?” The duchess twisted in her seat and looked at the girl in question, eyeing her from top to bottom, as if she were gauging the quality of a length of silk. “A mite young, wouldn’t you say? I daresay she’s fresh and innocent.”

“Oh, she looks innocent enough,” Lady Oxley declared, ignoring the hot glances from the people in the other boxes, who were actually watching the opera. “Gads, the trollops these merchants pass off as daughters is just appalling. My greatest fear is that Oxley will marry the chit and discover she’s been ruined. Oh, the shame of it.”

No reader can mistake that conversation at the opera for one happening at a modern movie theater—even though the fear that a child will marry the wrong person is just as

current a topic of conversation among parents today. The specific terms Boyle uses—*cit, chit*—may not be familiar to readers new to historical romance, but Boyle puts them in context to make the meaning clear. And using those unusual terms from the time helps to anchor the readers in the historical period of the story.

Dialogue in romance novels differs from author to author (one author will write light, witty, sparkling dialogue, while another will create slower-paced but more dramatic conversations) and among story types (romantic comedy requires a lighter, faster pace than romantic suspense). Many romance categories can include a number of different story types, so a single category won't necessarily have one identifiable style of dialogue.



IN REVIEW: Studying Romantic Dialogue

1. Take another look at the romance novels you've been studying, reading the dialogue. How do the characters talk to each other?
2. Do you always know which character is talking? How does the author tell you who's speaking?
3. If you have several different types of romances on hand, look for ways the dialogue differs between types. Do historical heroes and heroines talk to each other differently than contemporary heroes and heroines? Than chick-lit heroes and heroines?
4. How do the heroes and heroines talk to each other when they're arguing? Just talking? Making love?

INTROSPECTION

Introspection is just a fancy word for thinking. When your characters talk silently to themselves, contemplate taking action, reflect on past events or worry about future ones, or otherwise share what they're thinking with the readers, they are being introspective.

Introspection is useful in romance novels because it gives the readers direct access to a character's thoughts and allows you to bring in emotions that are otherwise difficult to express on the page. Like listening to the characters' private conversations, eavesdropping on their thoughts draws the readers further into the romance.

The main advantage of fiction over screenplay is that it allows you to use introspection. That's also one of the main disadvantages, because you may be tempted to allow far too much think-time for your characters.

Showing a heroine thinking about how angry she is at the hero—and vice versa—is no substitute for placing the characters in the same room and letting them argue. When writing introspection, be careful not to allow the character to give too much information to the readers, or to give that information too early in the story, thus ruining all the suspense. If the readers know all the character's history or innermost thoughts, there's little left to surprise the readers.

Direct and Indirect Thoughts

Characters' thoughts can be shared with the readers in two ways—directly and

indirectly. A *direct thought* is the exact words the character is thinking, while an *indirect thought* sums up the idea without using the exact words.

Direct: *This guy is a major pain in the butt*, she thought.

Indirect: She thought the man was a nuisance.

A direct thought most often uses present-tense verbs and first person—just as dialogue does—because it actually *is* dialogue; the words just aren’t spoken aloud. If the character is thinking about past events, the thought will be expressed in past tense; a direct thought will be in the person’s exact words (even if those words are unspoken).

An indirect thought uses past-tense verbs and third person—just like narrative—because it actually *is* narrative—it’s a summary of what the character is thinking.

How thoughts are handled in the published book is often determined by house style—the rules and guidelines governing how a particular publisher edits and typesets text. All the books printed by the same publisher will show thoughts in the same way. In many cases, direct thought—using the character’s exact words—will be shown in the finished book in italics, which makes direct

thought clear to the readers even if attribution (she thought) is omitted. So the above example would probably look like this:

This guy is a major pain in the butt.

Publishers vary, however; the examples in this book show several ways of handling thoughts. In your manuscript, you can use either italics or underlining to make a direct thought stand out from the surrounding text. Indirect thought isn’t set off in any special way—no italics and no underlining—because it’s just part of the narrative, reporting what’s going on. Some publishers still prefer authors to underline direct thoughts in the manuscript because it’s easier for typesetters to see the distinction.

Avoid using quotation marks when writing a character’s thoughts, because thoughts set apart in this way are easily confused with spoken dialogue.

Is direct or indirect thought better? That depends. If the actual words going through the character’s mind are brief and pithy, direct thought is probably the better choice. If you’re covering an extensive meditation, it’s probably better to summarize with indirect thought.

Most romance authors use both direct and indirect thought, though in first-person books, such as chick-lit, any thought the viewpoint character shares is by definition a direct thought—because, like the rest of her story, it’s expressed in the POV character’s exact words. Since there’s so much direct thought in these books, chick-lit usually doesn’t use italics to indicate it.

This example from Dianne Castell’s short contemporary novel *A Fabulous Wedding* relays both direct and indirect thoughts:

God, let me out of this and I’ll change. I swear it. No more pity parties over getting dumped by Danny for that Victoria’s Secret model, no more comfort junk food, no more telling everyone how to live their lives and not really living her own, and if that meant

leaving Whistlers Bend, she'd suck it up and do it and quit making excuses.

The section in italics is direct thought, the character's exact thoughts phrased in first person and present tense (like dialogue). The rest of the selection is indirect thought, a summary of the character's thoughts phrased in third person and past tense (like narrative), though it's phrased in language we can easily imagine the character using.

How Characters Think

Each character should think in his own style, with images appropriate to his experience, not to yours as the author. A figure skater will think in physical images, a nanny in childlike ones.

Male characters should think in masculine language and use images appropriate to their personalities. Keep in mind, however, that the hero's thoughts about the heroine should be about more than just his physical reactions to her. It's fine for him to notice her body, but if that's all he sees or thinks about, he's not a very appealing hero.

Characters should not think in full narrative paragraphs, reliving an entire sequence of events in a neat package and a logical order. People think in snatches; they don't start from the beginning of the problem and review it all in order each time it crosses their minds. Men in particular are more likely to think in fragments, and this trait can be handy in keeping the past details of a male character's story under wraps. Portraying a character jumping into the middle of a thought allows you to pass information to the readers in an intriguing way without giving away too many secrets.

In any case, just because the character knows something doesn't mean he'll be eager to share it with the readers. In this example from my sweet traditional romance *The Daddy Trap*, I wanted to share the feelings my hero had over meeting the heroine, his ex-wife, after a nine-year separation—without going into detail about the reasons they split up:

With the soft strains of a Mozart symphony filling the air, [Gibb] was just settling into his chair when he heard a car door bang down in the square. He glanced out and saw a small shadow crossing the sidewalk to look in the door at Potpourri.

The lights in the gift shop were still on, but it was obviously closed, for he saw Lindsay unlock the door to let the child in. Was it his imagination, or was the square really so quiet that he could hear the warm murmur of her voice? ...

How little she had changed in nine years. She'd been pretty at nineteen, with her golden-blond hair and wide-set brown eyes. Now that the girlish roundness was gone from her face, letting the exquisite bone structure show to advantage, she was beautiful. But he had no doubt she could still be a fire-spitting hellcat when someone got in her way. ... Maturity and responsibility had provided a veneer, but underneath the surface Lindsay Armentrout was the same unpredictably bubbling cauldron of hot lava that he'd fallen in love with so long ago—and that had burned him so badly.

But of course there was one very important difference in her life—the child she had craved as a little girl wants a doll. The child Gibb couldn't give her.

Her son had just turned eight, she'd said. Gibb's mental calendar told him that she had

waited only three or four months after he'd left Elmwood before she'd taken up with her child's father.

Or maybe she hadn't waited at all.

Gibb's musings on his failed marriage are intentionally far from complete. Had he been considering a business problem instead, he'd have been a great deal

more linear and thorough in his thinking. Even more important is the way his thoughts light on and then skitter away from the subject of Lindsay's son. Only a masochist would think in detail about such a painful subject.

When Not to Use Introspection

If it's necessary to do more than hint at a character's experiences or emotions, consider using dialogue instead of thoughts. It's livelier and more natural to have someone explain a situation to another person, especially if it's a complicated situation, than to think about it step-by-step. Keep the characters' thoughts to a minimum, and use introspection only when other ways of relaying the information don't work as well.



IN REVIEW: Studying Characters' Thoughts

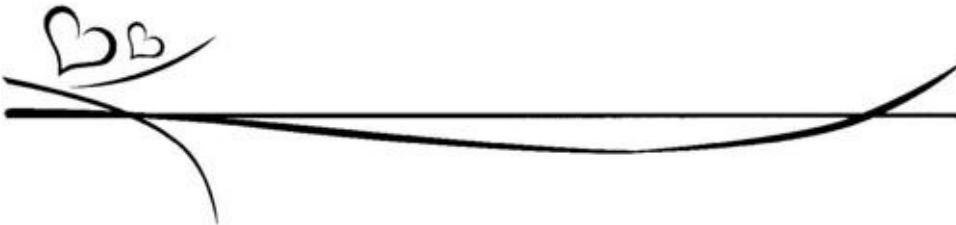
1. Look through the romance novels you've been studying. How much of the story is told through the characters' thoughts?
2. How are the thoughts shared?
3. Find examples of direct and indirect thoughts. Is one style more common than the other?
4. How does what the character says and does compare to what the character thinks?
5. Can you find differences in how the various authors handle thoughts? Differences between different kinds of romance novels?



Writing a Romantic Dialogue

Write a dialogue, including body language, gestures, words, and the thoughts of the POV character, between a man and a woman as they:

- Are on their way home from an office party where one of them was offended by the other's behavior.
- Stroll through a park.
- Talk about a friend who has fallen in love.
- Discuss whether they should have a large wedding or a small one.
- Reminisce about how they met.



chapter thirteen

Building a Believable Plot



The plot of your romance novel is the sequence of events that keep the characters together until they've learned to love each other and until they've grown and changed enough to resolve their long-term problems—the character flaws or past experiences that have kept them from forming a permanent commitment.

A story's plot can't simply be a series of random events—the kind of thing we experience day after day. Real life sprawls and wanders; it doesn't have neat beginnings and endings; and the loose ends are almost never completely tied up. A story that does the same thing—that wanders from one event to the next—will quickly lose the readers' attention.

Simply falling in love isn't a plot, either. There isn't enough action to keep the readers involved if you simply show two people dating, going out for dinner or to the movies, and talking about their childhoods, pets, jobs, or dreams.

So the plot of your romance novel must be a meaningful and logical series of events, not just a bunch of things that happen to your characters. Those events must cause the hero and heroine to become more involved with each other. Each occurrence or decision or episode should lead to the next, creating a surprising yet believable pattern of events that carry the characters from beginning to end.

In a romance novel, the events of the plot are closely related to the developing romance. Most of the plot events will involve both the hero and heroine, drawing them closer together—forcing them to spend time together and learn about each other—rather than separating them.

BUILDING YOUR PLOT ONE PROBLEM AT A TIME

You can build a plot by using the principles of cause and effect. Things don't happen in isolation; every *decision* you make and everything you do has consequences. In real life, most of those consequences are minimal and easily overlooked, but they're there. And sometimes they're not minimal at all.

Your kid's soccer uniform is dirty and he needs it for practice tonight, so you stop on your way out the door to throw in a load of laundry, which makes you five minutes late to

work. You aren't there yet when the phone rings, so your boss answers it instead and he finds out you've applied for another job, so when you come in he starts to yell at you for arranging a job interview on company time, so you yell back and quit. ...

One event leads to another, which leads to another. Every event in your plot should be both an effect of what came before and a cause of (or at least an influence on) what will come next. Thinking about cause and effect can help you create a plot that builds, rather than a series of unrelated events.

Using *What if?* to Enrich Your Problems

Once you have your main character's first basic problem in mind, you can use *What if?* to begin building events and consequences: *What if* the heroine is out of a job and she's evicted from her apartment? *What if* her preoccupation with her job loss makes her careless, and she causes a fire that forces her to move? *What if* it's a college town with the school year just starting, so apartments are in short supply? *What if* she loses control of her car and totals it? *What if* somebody assumes she wrecked the car on purpose, despondent over the job? *What if* she has no insurance?

Let your mind roam freely as you brainstorm. At this point, don't worry if you create contradictory scenarios. (You probably wouldn't want to use both the eviction and the car accident, because you're writing about a heroine, not about Poor Pitiful Pearl tied to the railroad tracks.) Later, you can choose which lines of thought work best, which ones fit together, and which ones rule out other possibilities.

What if? allows you to start with the nugget of an idea and develop it into the future. This technique works well throughout the writing process. Look at the problem as it currently appears and ask *What if?*

Backward Plotting

Backward plotting is *almost the opposite of the *What if?* technique described above*: You start with the situation or scenario you want to create, then figure out what you need to have in place beforehand to make that scenario logical, believable, and inevitable. Backward plotting can work on any specific plot point—especially one that the readers may find hard to swallow.

One of my favorite examples of the value of backward plotting is a story in which one of the main characters is eventually revealed to be the long-lost grandson of another major character. To reveal that relationship out of the blue stretches the readers' credulity. But if two supporting points are established beforehand—that there's a mystery about the family, and that the grandson is investigating and searching for something—the revelation, while still surprising, is emotionally satisfying rather than confusing. Of course, you can't be obvious about those things, or you won't have much suspense.

Using *What if?* and Backward Plotting Together

By using the two plotting techniques—*What if?* and backward plotting—in tandem, you can easily create a believable scenario: *What if* instead of having your hero openly admit that he's searching for his roots, you give him another very good reason for

curiosity about this mysterious family? And *what if he* has some possessions that indicate there's something not quite on the up-and-up about him? But what kinds of possessions could he have that would offer clues and help him search, without giving him an easy answer? Backward plotting can help you figure out not only what items he has but how they came into his possession and what they mean.

By using the two techniques together, you can establish the hero's curiosity without giving away the reasons behind the curiosity. By showing the hero's possessions and hinting that there's a secret about him, you lay the groundwork for when one of his possessions leads to a breakthrough. When his suspicions are proved true, the readers will be prepared for the secret to come out.

What if? and backward plotting work extremely well together. By using them in turn you can develop your characters' problems, create a believable plot, and at the same time spot troublesome areas or holes before they develop.

Plot Building 101

Let's put cause and effect, backward plotting, and *What if?* together and see what happens.

What if your heroine's long-term problem is that she's never felt truly loved—and her short-term problem is that she discovers, just as she's about to walk down the aisle, that her fiance is only after her money?

What if she decides to run instead of going through with the wedding? But why would she go to such lengths? Heroines by definition are grown-ups. Wouldn't she just tell her father about the fiance, or walk into the church and announce she's not getting married?

Probably—so *what if you* have her try to call off the wedding, but her father refuses to believe she means it and goes to get the fiance to soothe her pre-wedding

jitters? That creates time pressure—if she's going to leave to give herself time to think without being pressured, she's got to do it immediately, without any time to plan or pack.

What does she take with her? What does she leave behind? Where is she going—does she have any idea at all? If she only has fifteen minutes to escape, how does she go about it? Does she run in her wedding gown? That could be really inconvenient for the story later on—so perhaps she should take five minutes to get out of her fancy dress and into jeans. But that means she has five fewer minutes to think about where she's going and what she'll need.

Or, for that matter, how she's going to get away. *What if* the wedding's not at an ordinary church but at her father's estate—which is locked up even tighter than usual to provide security for the wedding guests and gifts? If she tries to get past the gates, she'll be discovered. She can't take her car; she can't throw a suitcase over the wall. And time is ticking away.

What if she has help? Who would be in a position to help her? An estate employee? Not likely—that would be a great way to lose a job. A short-term employee, like a florist or a caterer? A wedding guest? Maybe. But how's she going to find this person who's willing

to help? How will she know who's safe to approach?

What if she doesn't approach him but runs into him—almost falls over him? What's he doing? Why is he there? *What if he's* someone who has ties to the estate and the family but who isn't dependent on it for his livelihood? That means he can take action without fear of losing his job.

Why, though, is he even there, if he's not a part of the wedding? *What if* his father works on the estate, and your hero has known the heroine forever? *What if he's* suffering from a long-term crush on the heroine, so he's come to be near for a last hopeless moment before she's lost to him? How about making him the gardener's son, who's come to visit his father? He grew up there and he knows where there's a secret gate, so he can help the heroine get out.

What if he realizes that the ex-bride is too stressed to be sensible, so he goes along to keep her safe? (Maybe you can give him more gentlemanly instincts than are really good for him, to make that work.)

He even takes her in his car, since she can't get hers out of the garage. And you don't want her to have a car anyway—it would be too easy to trace. But now you're back to having all the same problems—she'll be seen leaving in his car. Unless she leaves through the wall, and he drives out in the usual way, and then they won't be suspected of being together.

Now you have them both outside the wall, with a set of wheels but not much else. No change of clothes, no cash, just what's in his pockets and her purse. And make it a little tiny purse, just to limit how much useful stuff she can have.

But where are they going to go?

What if she's so annoyed at her father for not believing her that she's ready to *run* away altogether? And *what if she's* ticked enough about being toolled by her fiance the gold digger that she proposes to the gardener's son? *What if* she decides that if she's going to be married for her money, it might as well be to a man of her choice? *What if* he thinks she might be crazy enough to marry just anyone, so he agrees to the proposal in order to keep her from doing something even crazier? *What if* they decide to elope, choosing a destination where they can be married without delay?

Does she mean to go through with it? Does he? Or are they just going through the motions? In the meantime, they've got to start off somewhere; they can't just sit outside the estate. So *what if they* head toward their selected marital destination?

It's a long way, and they know her father will be looking for them. How are they going to manage the trip? You don't want it to be too easy, so do some backward plotting here—have her be honorable and leave her diamond ring behind so she can't pawn it.

What resources do they have? Surely they each have at least one credit card, but card transactions are easily traced. He'd planned for a day trip to see his father, so he's only got a little cash. She was figuring on a honeymoon, so she doesn't have much cash either.

What if they're pulled over by a highway patrolman for having faulty lights? (Here's

another good backward plotting point: If you make the car an old one, you also gain an excuse for the heroine tripping over the hero—he was lying in the driveway, changing the oil.) With a ticket, they can't drive the car until the lights are fixed, but they can't wait around for the mechanic either—so *what if* they buy another vehicle for their getaway? Since they're short of cash, they have to settle for a clunker of a truck—which is bound to lead to more trouble, but at least now nobody can guess what they're driving.

Now they have no cash left at all. In order to replenish their resources, they have no choice but to use a credit card. To throw off pursuers, they drive in the opposite direction from their real destination to get a cash advance from an ATM. That goes smoothly—now you've arranged it so they can at least eat and buy a change of clothes. Their success prompts them to try for a bigger score before the credit card issuer is notified that there's a problem. But when they go into a bank to make a larger withdrawal, the teller realizes there's a flag on the account and she confiscates both the credit card and the heroine's ID. They have to run again to avoid being questioned about how they got the credit card, without the cash they'd hoped to get and now with the heroine having no driver's license.

When they reach a place where they can be married, she can't prove her identity—an effect of having lost her driver's license. So they're refused a marriage license but—another bit of backward plotting here—if that honeymoon she was

planning was outside the United States, she'd have her passport, so they can get over that hurdle.

One event leads to the next. One incident becomes the cause of the next event. One problem complicates the next. *What if?* and backward plotting work together to create a logical, almost inevitable plot in which each event involves both the hero and the heroine, drawing them closer together and giving them every opportunity to fall in love.



Plotting Practice

Use the *What if?* and backward plotting techniques to develop the following ideas into potential stories:

1. In the middle of winter, a half-frozen man stumbles into the heroine's house.
2. The heroine wants to have a baby, but she doesn't want a husband.
3. The hero needs a date to the company Christmas party.
4. A couple who split up a year ago are asked to be best man and maid of honor at the wedding of mutual friends.
5. The hero gets the job the heroine wanted.

LOGICAL AND BELIEVABLE ACTION

Sometimes, when you know that your hero and heroine are lovely people who are perfect for each other, it's easy to forget that the main characters themselves don't yet know that they're destined to be together. So the characters start acting as if they already have an understanding about how they'll spend the rest of their lives, even if they've just

met.

This is how you get a heroine who, when her car breaks down in the middle of a strange neighborhood, puts her trust in a stranger with a gun, follows him back to his place, and spends the night—instead of locking the doors and asking him to call the auto club. This is how you get a hero who’s sure that the strange woman shrieking insults at him is just having a terrible day, that she isn’t ordinarily like that, and that she’ll be the perfect woman to bear his children.

How would a sensible person react in these circumstances—knowing what she knows *right now*, not what she’ll know in a few days or a few weeks? Is the character acting logically? Is she reacting realistically to the events in your plot?

What’s the Motivation?

The character’s motivation—her reason for doing what she does—is all-important, and the more understandable the character’s motivations are, the more en-

gaging the story will be. Why do the characters get involved? Why do they think the action they’re taking is the best one for them at the moment?

In the example of the runaway bride, the story would be much less compelling if she’d been having doubts all along or if—with no outside impetus—she simply decided not to get married that day. Because she has a good reason for calling off the wedding (discovering her fiance is more in love with her trust fund than with her) and for running away rather than facing her guests (her father’s refusal to believe her), the plot is much more plausible and engaging. Of course, the story would also be much less interesting if the hero just went along on a whim. But, because he has a reason for wanting to protect the heroine (his gentlemanly instincts, brought out by her self-destructive impulses) and a reason for wanting to get closer to her (that crush he’s had on her), his decision to go along for the ride is understandable.

Why does the character do *this*, rather than *that*? What does the character want, and why? Why is this event happening right now instead of last year or next month? Why is this event or problem seemingly the worst thing that could happen to this person?

If you can explain *why*—and make your readers believe that the reason is logical and sensible—then you can do almost anything you like with your characters and your plot.

The Convenient Coincidence

In real life, coincidences happen all the time. We shrug them off and go straight on. So the temptation when we’re writing fiction is to say, “Well, it *could* have happened that way,” no matter how improbable the situation.

The trouble is that, unlike events in real life, the events in a story have to make sense. Too many coincidences—too many convenient happenings, chance encounters, and just-happen-to-overhears—only serve to remind the readers they’re reading a story.

In fact, books are full of coincidences. The trick is to make them so logical and believable that the readers don’t notice (for example) what a strange thing it is for the hero

and heroine to be in the same place at the same time.

If you have the slightest suspicion that an episode in your story is just a little too convenient, then it probably is. Your challenge is to find a way to make it logical and believable that your characters would be at that place, at that moment, in that company, under those circumstances.

To keep your coincidences under control, give your characters a reason for what they do, and foreshadow their actions (foreshadowing will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter).

MAINTAINING MOMENTUM: THE IMPORTANCE OF SUSPENSE

In order to keep the readers' attention through the long midsection of the book, you'll need to continue to develop the conflict and advance the plot in logical steps without making the story predictable. What keeps the readers turning pages is suspense, which you can create using a variety of techniques, including tension, pacing, and foreshadowing.

The suspense that keeps the readers paging through your book isn't the same kind of suspense named in the romantic suspense subgenre—books that involve characters being chased by bad guys, or trying to solve mysteries, or spying on the enemy. The suspense we're discussing here doesn't necessarily involve the characters being in peril; it's created whenever there's something the readers want to know. Will Joe kiss Brenda? Will Sally give in to Brad's demand that she work for him? Will the letter Jill just took out of her mailbox be the answer she wants? Will Jared answer Katherine's question or dodge it?

Whenever you cause the readers to be curious about what comes next, you're creating suspense. Suspense arises naturally from good writing—it's not a spice to be added separately.

In fiction, you create suspense by withholding information from the characters and/or the readers. You, as the author, can therefore create suspense in three main ways:

- **By withholding information from the readers.** The author knows the entire hidden story behind the plot and characters: the backstory and the plot twists that are yet to come. A new writer is apt to spill out the backstory and hidden story right away, but most stories are improved when at least some of that information is held back—sometimes up to the very end.

- **By withholding information from the characters.** This is the Hitchcock effect—so called because Alfred Hitchcock was a master of it in his films. By reading between the lines and applying common sense and experience, the readers (like Hitchcock's movie audience) can draw conclusions about what's likely to be coming up. But, like the movie audience, the readers are powerless to prevent a character from stepping into a yawning trap that only the readers can foresee.

- **By having the main characters withhold information from the readers and other characters.** Just because a character knows something doesn't mean he has to share it with the readers (even if he's a POV character). And even hidden motives will affect how a character acts, clueing alert readers to what's really going on.

When you're writing scenes in which suspense is crucial, keep in mind that putting too much backstory early in the book and using *too much introspection*

to divulge information about your characters are great ways to bore the readers and destroy any suspense you may have established.

There are, however, a number of techniques you can use to increase the level of suspense in your scenes:

- **Keep the action intense.** If significant amounts of time go by without suspense-ful action, with the hero and heroine living their everyday lives, the story loses momentum and the readers may lose interest.

- **Make the danger feel real to the readers.** If the hero and heroine stop in the middle of a chase scene to share a passionate interlude, trusting to dumb luck to keep them from being discovered, then it's going to be hard to convince the readers that they have reason to be fearful. If the readers are to believe in the danger, then the characters must act as if they're threatened. Even if the danger isn't physical, keep pressure on the characters; don't let their problems slip into the background.

- **Keep the bad guy in check.** The villain needs to be believably, logically bad, not a cartoon. But to allow him to actually rape, pillage, and torture moves the book into general fiction rather than romance.

- **Keep the emotional level high.** Even if the story doesn't involve physical danger for the characters, their lifelong happiness is at stake. Keeping emotions at the core of the story reminds the readers how important the situation is.

- **Limit the story's time frame.** Putting restrictions on how long your story can last increases suspense. A two-week vacation, a school semester, a train journey, a wedding date, a project deadline—all can function as time clocks, pushing the hero and heroine into action. Because the ending point of the story is inflexible, the characters will act more quickly and somewhat differently than they would if they had all the time in the world.

- **Repeat an action, phrase, or event.** The first use of the action or line of dialogue may be almost casual, doing little more than getting the readers' attention. The second use makes it clear that this bit of information is important (*though the* readers may not quite see why) and foreshadows the important action to come. The third use is the most emphatic: The stakes have grown enormous and the readers, having been properly prepared, are on the edge of their seats waiting to see what will happen.

- **Don't show what everyone's thinking.** If the heroine assesses the hero's clenched jaw and assumes he's mad at her, and then you show him thinking about his aching molar, the heroine doesn't know she's wrong, but the readers do—and all the suspense is gone from the scene. In this example from Claire Cross's chick-lit novel *Double Trouble*, we see the heroine drawing conclusions about the hero, but we have no idea whether she's correct:

I never could figure out why he married my sister. Unless a wife and kids were necessary accessories for the lawyer-destined-for-Great-Things—and she was as good a

choice as any. They never seemed to have much in common, but maybe it was something basic between them. Like lust. Marcia used to be quite a looker, and I say that with the undue modesty of an identical twin.

Tonight, James looked surprisingly haggard and annoyed for a man made of granite, and as I mentioned, that expression didn't improve when he saw me.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Oooh, a vulgarity. Of course, the strumpet sister had invaded the last bastion of propriety in the Free World. That, at least, conformed to our usual script. His job was to make sure I didn't feel welcome enough to hang around too long and taint the precious boys. I knew my lines by heart.

Too bad I hadn't worn something really skimpy, just to tick him off. I slouched harder, knowing that perfect posture was a household holy grail. "You should be more gracious to the one doing your dirty work."

The man glowered at me. "What are you talking about?"

"Your kids called me from the pool when no one picked them up."

James flicked a glance up the stairs, some parental part of him clearly reassured by the ruckus coming from the bathroom. "Where's Marcia?"

"Where were you? Takes two for the fun part. Why should one be left with all the work after that?"

What's going on with James? We don't know why he's haggard and annoyed. We know what conclusions the heroine has drawn—but is she correct? Why does the heroine have a reputation as the strumpet sister? Why are these two in so much conflict that they have a "usual script" for their interactions?

We will have to turn the page and go on if we want to find out.

Tension

Maintaining tension means maintaining pressure on the characters. Over the course of the story, the characters' troubles should grow larger, harder to handle, seemingly more insoluble. The characters' emotional involvement (and hence the readers' attachment to the characters) grows right along with the difficulties the characters face.

Many beginning writers raise a problem and immediately solve it, let the characters take a break, and then move on to the next problem. But if the characters are hunting for a hidden diamond necklace and they find it in the first place they look, all the excitement is gone. Dangle the problems, let them get worse step-by-step—let the readers enjoy watching the characters deal with pressure.

You don't have to keep the pressure on every single moment—but if you create believable tension, the readers will always know that the troubles are there in the

background. Even when you're allowing your characters a short break, problems are ready to pop up again at any moment, and they'll probably be even worse than before.

When your characters solve a problem, the readers can relax—and perhaps put the book down. Even if you know there's another difficulty waiting in the wings, if you haven't told the readers it's coming, then the readers can't be worried over what will happen. So before you solve one problem or let your characters find an answer to one portion of their conflict, you need to set up the next set of complications.

Pacing

Proper pacing results in a story that neither rushes nor drags; it unfolds as if the readers were there watching. Tell the readers what they need to know when they need to know it, and not one moment sooner. You can heighten tension by delaying a revelation as long as possible, dangling it just out of reach until the readers can't bear not knowing.

Keep in mind that good pacing often involves telling several parts of the story at once. At any given moment, you'll not only be showing what's going on right now, you'll be wrapping up loose ends from action in the last scene or chapter. At the same time, you'll be hinting at what's coming in the next few scenes. All this is tough to do. Straight-line writing, handling one thing at a time, is much easier. But the hints and the extras are what creates suspense.

Proper pacing requires you to always keep at least one problem or difficulty hanging over your characters. Never leave your characters without a threat to deal with, and never leave your readers without a worry—right up to the last few pages before the ending.

Varying the Pace

It's important to vary the pace of the story. Too much action or tension soon grows tedious. Not every event can be a slam-bam car chase, and if you try to maintain that kind of speed, you'll wear out the effect. It's the variations in pacing that make action scenes so effective. Consider following a short scene with a longer one. Consider the benefits of following an active scene with a slower and more reflective one. In general, the more important a scene is, the longer and deeper it can be.

Even your word choice has an effect on the pacing of your story. Use short sentences and lots of verbs to move action along quickly, longer sentences and more adjectives to slow the story down so the readers have a chance to take everything in.

Using Transitions to Manipulate Pace

Transitions—the shifts from one time and place to another—can make or break your pacing. Many writers are tempted to go into too much detail about how a character gets from one place to another, or what happens to her in the time between her arrival at home and her date picking her up for dinner.

If something very important is occurring during that time—perhaps the heroine is working out her strategy for dealing with the hero, or perhaps there's a burglar waiting to leap out of her closet—then show it. Otherwise, stick to brief summary. If the heroine is thinking of something important, show only a few of her actions, just enough to provide a background for her thought process.

The readers don't need to know that the heroine looked through her closet and pulled

out three different dresses; they don't need full descriptions of the three dresses. They don't need to know that she decided to wear pants instead, then brushed her teeth and opened a new bottle of shampoo and washed and conditioned her hair until it was silky smooth and then got dressed, starting with red thong underwear. It's adequate to tell the readers the following:

She tossed her keys on the hall table and went to get ready. She'd figured out what she was going to tell him over dinner, and she was just stepping into the sexiest pair of shoes she owned when the doorbell rang.

The readers will assume all the rest, because they've gotten ready for a date or two in their lives. If the details interfere with the momentum of the story, you probably don't need the details.

Withholding the Backstory

Most writers feel a temptation to pour out the backstory—what's happened to the main characters to bring them to this point in their lives—early in the writing process. Revealing a character's whole history will explain exactly how he's gotten into the current problem, but it also tells the readers much more than they need to know—more than they're prepared to take in early in the story.

Hinting at what's happened to the character in the past helps to build suspense, but save the details of the backstory until it's absolutely necessary for the readers' understanding—or, as my first editor inelegantly put it, until "the reader's tongue is hanging out to know what really happened." Keep the readers wondering and guessing, and they'll keep reading.

In this example from the first few pages of her sweet traditional novel *In the Arms of the Sheikh*, Sophie Weston hints at her heroine's dramatic past:

Natasha's frown deepened. She had never heard Izzy sound like that before. Well, not since—

She pulled her mind away from the dark memories. The bad time was three years past. Gone. She and Izzy had got out of the jungle alive and well and so had everyone else. All was well that ended well, in fact. The nightmares would go too, in time. *But that* didn't explain why Izzy sounded so stiff and false.

It's another hundred and fifty pages before Weston tells us what happened to Natasha in the jungle, and even then she gives few details, just the overarching

story—because that's all we need to know in order to understand why Natasha reacted this way here.

The best place to present the details of the character's backstory is usually in dialogue. It's a powerful scene when the heroine explains to the hero how being jilted (or abandoned as a child, or accused of murder, or whatever) has made her reluctant to trust and share her life. If you simply show her thinking about it, or if she tells a secondary character who then tells the hero, the resulting scene is much less emotionally compelling.

You may be tempted to present the backstory through flashback, but that's seldom a good idea. Returning the readers to the past stops the progress of the main story. If we were to flash back to the jungle with Natasha and relive her experiences there, the past story might overwhelm the current one. Only if the backstory involves both hero and heroine can you really justify using a flashback, one that actually shows what happened between them.

No matter how you opt to share the backstory with the readers, use only as much as you absolutely must in order to make your characters' motivations clear. The story is not about the character's painful childhood or his horrible marriage. A few well-chosen examples will usually make the point; using more than that will *put* the current story at risk.

Keeping the Hidden Story Under Wraps

The same basic rules apply to the hidden story—what's *really* going on that one of the main characters (usually the heroine) doesn't know. Is the ragged-looking hero a millionaire in disguise? Why is he so reluctant to commit to a marriage? What was the real reason he didn't want to have children?

Even in a story that uses both the hero's and heroine's points of view, it's possible to keep the hidden story hidden until the readers are dying to know what's going on, and doing so increases the suspense level in the entire book.

The hero knows perfectly well why he doesn't want to have children—but it's not something he enjoys thinking about. So he veers away from the subject even in his thoughts, leaving the readers with no more than hints, intrigued but still in the dark.

In this selection from her long contemporary romance *Operation: Second Chance*, Roxanne Rustand hints at two hidden stories. Both the heroine and the hero are keeping secrets. The heroine's photographs show a woman very different from the one the hero meets, a contradiction the heroine would prefer not to explain. And the hero neglected to tell the heroine that he rented a room in her house because he's investigating her. With two sets of hints to follow, the readers are doubly intrigued:

He'd intended to check out the glamorous Mrs. Hilliard and carefully begin investigating her past. He'd never expected to end up living in her house. He'd also never expected to find her so ... interesting.

The photograph clipped from a society page of the newspaper bore little resemblance to the woman herself.

Where were the diamonds, the cold elegance? And she wasn't as tall as he'd guessed, though high heels and a low camera angle could account for that. There'd even been a merry twinkle in her eyes when she'd bantered with the little girl.

If she'd been involved in her late husband's activities, that twinkle would disappear fast enough when she found herself staring at prison walls during a fifteen-to-twenty-year sentence. Though now, after meeting her, the thought didn't fill him with the same sense of satisfaction that it had before.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing heightens suspense by hinting at action that is yet to come. If you foreshadow correctly, the readers will be able to accept events that otherwise might strike them as illogical, unbelievable, or coincidental. By properly preparing your readers, you eliminate the need to explain what's going on when the event actually takes place. For instance, if the elevator is going to crash, make it creak a time or two first—the hint to your readers will make them anxious to see what happens. (Of course, if it creaks and creaks and then *doesn't* crash, your readers will feel cheated.)

Even relatively unimportant action can benefit from foreshadowing. I planned to get a hero and heroine into an intimate and embarrassing position by having her trip over a carpet seam, upset his office chair, and fall on top of him. But that's an awfully convenient outcome—one that might make readers say, "Yeah, right, like *that* would really happen."

So I planted two bits of information ahead of time. *Well* ahead of time—almost a hundred pages before the chair upsets. On her first visit to his office, the heroine notes that the hero's chair "looked as if it were defying gravity," and that it "tipped back alarmingly." The second foreshadowing appears just a couple of pages before the crash, when the heroine comments about the state of the hero's office furnishings, and he replies that the carpet may be slightly threadbare, but it's clean. When the heroine trips over a loose seam in that carpet just a few minutes later, the readers are well prepared.

The trick in foreshadowing is to give the readers all the information they need to figure out the book's secrets, but to do so in such a way that they won't succeed in doing so. Each bit of foreshadowing should have at least two outcomes, with the real one a trifle less obvious than the red herring you want your readers to pursue. For instance, if you want your heroine to observe the hero getting angry at a comment that's made to him, you can put in two comments—one that would annoy anyone, another that seems innocuous. The heroine will assume that the annoying comment is the one he's reacting to, and she'll pass over the second one. But the readers have heard it, so when the truth eventually comes out, they'll be prepared when they find out that the seemingly innocent statement is the one that actually caused the trouble.

Foreshadowing can be presented in narrative, action, or dialogue. You can mask it by slipping it in among a lot of other details, or by surrounding it with humor to distract the readers from the importance of the clue.

Foreshadowing can also be present in what a character *doesn't* do or say. If the hero, seeing a baby crib in the heroine's apartment, asks, "Do you have children?" and the heroine answers, "I keep my friends' kids a lot," the readers are unlikely to notice that she didn't really answer the question—and only later will the implications of that nonanswer become apparent.

Foreshadowing can even be presented straight out, if there are several possible interpretations of the hint and you emphasize one of the alternatives instead of the real thing. This kind of foreshadowing is like a magician's sleight of hand, when he draws your attention to one hand so he can use the other one to manipulate the white rabbits unseen. You can draw the readers toward a false interpretation while guiding them away from the correct one.

In this selection from my sweet traditional romance *The Husband Sweepstake*, socialite Erika has begged the concierge of her apartment building to find someone to escort her to a banquet, and he suggests his assistant, Amos:

“What kind of a banquet is it and who will be there? If there are connections to be made, then maybe—”

“It’s for adult literacy,” Erika said. “So your friend can hang out with authors and publishers and readers and agents and—”

Stephen was smiling.

“You’ve thought of someone? Stephen, you’re an angel.”

Amos slid off the desk. “Now that you have the problem solved, I’ll be—” “It sounds right down Amos’s alley,” Stephen said.

Erika stared at him. “This is no time for a joke.” “I was serious. Amos is writing a book. That’s why he’s here.”

Erika tipped her head to one side and inspected Amos. She thought she saw irritation flicker in his eyes.

Well, that makes two of us who are annoyed at being fixed up with each other, she thought.

What really caused the irritation flickering in Amos’s eyes? Being fixed up for a date with a socialite? That’s what I want you to think, and that’s why I used Erika’s reaction to point you that way. In fact, he’s annoyed at being outed as a

writer, because his real reason for taking this job is to research Erika’s life for his book —something the reader doesn’t find out for another hundred pages.

The earlier an event is foreshadowed, the less obvious the foreshadowing will be to the readers. Foreshadowing in the first few pages of a story can be very effective, because the readers are still getting acquainted with the characters and haven’t yet settled in to read analytically.

If properly done, foreshadowing doesn’t slow the forward progress of the current scene, and it lays the groundwork so later pieces of the story are kept running up to speed. Foreshadowing is best when it’s so subtle that the readers don’t consciously notice it until the second time they read the book.

It’s rare for an author to pull off all the necessary foreshadowing in the first draft. Many of the best examples don’t present themselves to the author until she’s revising the manuscript.

SUBPLOTS

Subplots are the side actions going on while the main story is unfolding. Even short romances without much room for extras can include some subplots, as long as they’re closely related to the main plot. In my book *The Boss’s Daughter*, the main story is that the heroine has to step into her ailing father’s shoes and take over his auction company, which

forces her to deal with his arrogant personal assistant. But there's also a strong subplot involving the interaction between her soon-to-be-divorced parents. Their interaction is what forces the heroine to take the job; it creates *some* of the conflict between her and the hero; it brings about the book's most dramatic moment, which forces her to realize that she's fallen in love. Because the subplot is so closely intertwined with the main story, it works very well. If the subplot had featured the pending divorce of the heroine's best friend instead, it would have drawn attention away from the main characters.

It's very easy to get sidetracked by subplots because they can be a lot more interesting and easier to write than the main story. The heroine's parents can be as catty to each other as they like because they don't have to be heroic. And the actions occurring alongside the main plot are sometimes more fun than keeping your hero and heroine in opposition.

PLOT CLICHES

Because there have been thousands of romance novels published in the last century, it's inevitable that some of them have featured similar plots. Usually the fact that the characters in each book are different makes even the similar plots distinctive, too. But there are some plot points that have been so overused that they're worn out and require an entirely new approach to make them unpredictable and exciting again.

The only way to be aware of all these problem areas is to read a lot. Some of the standards that appear in far too many romance novels include the heroine running smack into the hero (usually feeling as if she's hit a solid wall when she collides with his chest); the hero walking in on the heroine in her bath; the heroine walking in on the hero while he's clad only in a towel; the heroine falling, so the hero has to catch her; the heroine breaking the heel off her shoe; the hero and heroine feeling an electrical jolt on first touch; the heroine seeing fireworks with the first kiss.

Beginning writers often feel that they've created something entirely new when they use one of these cliches. But the appearance of a trite, overused scenario in a manuscript tells the editor that the writer is still an amateur.

IN REVIEW: Studying Romantic Plots



1. Look back through the romance novels you've been reading. What sorts of events does the author use to bring the characters together?
2. Choose one book and make a list, in order, of the major events that occur in the plot. How do events early in the story cause or lead to other, later events?
3. How does the author create suspense? Do you want to keep turning pages?
4. Are there times when the characters relax, without pressure on them? At those moments, do you want to keep on reading?
5. What events did the author foreshadow? How did she hint at these events? Did you notice the hint at the time or only see it after the event happened?
6. Are there subplots in the book? How does the author keep them from overwhelming the main story?



1. What main events will occur in your story?
2. How will each event draw your main characters closer together?
3. How will each event complicate their lives?
4. How does each event lead to another event, or cause a complication or repercussion for your main characters?
5. How can you create suspense for your readers to make them keep turning pages?
6. How can you arrange events in your story so the pressure is never entirely off your characters? Can you rearrange events so a new complication arises before the previous one is entirely solved?
7. What events in your story might be considered implausible? What events might be so startling that the reader is confused? How can you use foreshadowing to prepare the reader for those events?



chapter fourteen

Bringing It All Together



After all the work you've done on your book, it's hard to let go of characters who have become tremendously important to you. At the same time, it's sometimes a temptation to rush through the last chapter or two, just for the sheer relief of writing *The End* to a project that has consumed you for months or even years. But no matter how strong the rest of the book is, the ending is all-important.

Mystery writer Mickey Spillane has been quoted as saying, "Your first chapter sells your novel. Your last chapter sells your next novel."—and that's just as true of romance as of hard-boiled private-eye tales. The readers remember the ending—and if they don't come away from your romance novel feeling rewarded and gratified, they're not likely to seek you out on the bookstore shelves again.

So the final unfolding of the story—where the conflict is resolved and the couple at last finds a way to settle their differences and be together—is an extraordinarily important part of the romance.

In this chapter, we'll look at both of the important parts of the ending.- resolving the conflict by creating satisfactory solutions to the problems you've given your characters, and bringing the romantic relationship through the threatening black moment and on to a happy and rewarding finish that will leave your readers feeling uplifted.

RESOLUTIONS

At the end of a book, all the important issues must be resolved in a way that is both fair to the characters and satisfying to the readers. This is particularly important in a romance, in which the need for a happy ending pretty much requires that all the conflicts be negotiated, all the problems be solved, and all the loose ends be tied up in neat bows.

The problem your hero and heroine have struggled with throughout the story should not be easily resolved—if it was such a simple thing to fix, it wouldn't have taken them so long to find an answer. If one or the other simply gives in, are they going to be happy for long? If one partner simply changes his mind about the disagreement, the readers may doubt the strength of that character's original convictions. If his dedication to his beliefs was so shallow, is this person a heroic character? And if he was willing to give up something that was originally so important to him, why did he wait until the last chapter to make the change?

If one character is going to have a big change of heart, then the story needs to show the character thinking about that decision, struggling with it, and growing and changing so his old way of thinking no longer works and the new way feels right.

If one character makes a great sacrifice for the sake of the other, the readers must be convinced that the character will not later resent what he has given up.

An ending is most believable and satisfying—and happy—when it requires both the hero and the heroine to give up something for the sake of their love. This establishes a basic equality in the relationship and also makes the conflict resolution more acceptable.

The ending must come about because of the actions of the characters themselves, not through the interference of others. If the hero and heroine would never have spoken to each other again if not for the well-meaning friends who locked them in a room together, the readers will question the depth of their feelings for each other and wonder whether they can solve future problems on their own. (Imagine if, at the end of *Gone With the Wind*, Scarlett had come running home to find Rhett already gone—and Mammy explains Rhett's reasons for leaving, instead of Rhett himself.)

If one of the points of conflict has been the hero's bad behavior, then he must convince the readers (as well as the heroine) that he's changed his ways. That takes more than simply swearing he'll act differently in the future; he'll need to prove that he's learned a lesson and won't backslide.

It's anticlimactic to have two people who have hated each other all the way through the story simply fall into each others' arms on the last page and declare their devotion. The ultimate happy ending isn't merely for the hero to say, "I love you, I want to live with you always," and the heroine to sigh, lean against him, and say, "I love you, too." Have you

convinced the readers that they will still be together and happy five years, ten years, or fifty years from now?

Convincing the readers requires more than just getting the couple together long enough to walk them down the aisle. You have to look beyond the wedding vows to ask what they will see in each other in years to come, after the fascination of new love has faded.

IMPORTANT PROBLEMS, IMPORTANT SOLUTIONS

If a particular element of the story has been very important throughout the book, then the solution or final handling of that element should be equally large and important; the difficulty shouldn't just trail off as if the author got tired of it.

For instance, if a big problem in the story has been that the hero's daughter didn't want her father to remarry, then the ending shouldn't be the kid simply shrugging her shoulders and saying, "Well, I guess it's all right after all"; there should be a good reason for her change of heart. If all through the book the hero and heroine have been trying to find out who embezzled the money, then the ending shouldn't be a last-minute discovery that the cash was just mislaid instead of stolen; the embezzler should be unmasked, and the answer to the puzzle should be a surprise to the readers.

If a previous experience or character flaw was important enough to keep the hero or heroine from forming a lifetime commitment, then it shouldn't go away just because it's suddenly convenient for the plot. What makes the character realize his previous feelings were wrong? What forces him to face up to new" and difficult truths? What makes it possible for him to change at the end, if he couldn't before?

REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS

If a secondary character has put himself on the line for the hero and heroine, his action shouldn't go unnoticed; in the end, his risk should be repaid with a fitting reward. If he has faithfully assisted the heroine to hang on to her property, for instance, and now she and the hero own two ranches, the helpful secondary character should get the smaller spread.

Similarly, villains should be punished in proportion to their crimes. A character who has committed murder should receive a different level of justice than one who has robbed a store.

That said, no matter how bad the villain is, his ultimate downfall usually comes about because of his own actions. If the villain ends up stabbed to death, it's generally not because the hero set out to kill him but because the villain aimed a cowardly blow at the hero and it backfired. Or the villain may have moved at the wrong moment and turned a shot that the hero intended to wound into a fatal one. The hero and heroine remain heroic and humane, within the context of the situation, even when threatened.

In this example from Claire Delacroix's single-title historical *The Warrior*, the villain, Dubhglas, is just about to kill the hero and is taunting him with the lie that he has raped the heroine, Aileen, when she takes matters into her own hands:

"No!" Aileen cried, tipped the arrow into the flames, then loosed it directly at Dubhglas. He turned at the sound of her voice, his movement ensuring that the arrow

caught him in the other eye.

Notice that though Aileen shot him, it was Dubhglas's own action that caused the true severity of his injury—having lost one eye to an earlier skirmish, he loses the remaining one here because he moves in relation to the path of the arrow.

THE BLACK MOMENT

All the twists and turns of the short-term problem, all the character-building difficulties, all the foreshadowing and suspense and love scenes lead eventually to the *black moment*, the point in the story at which it seems impossible that the long-term problem can ever be solved. This is the deep, horrible moment when all appears lost, when either the hero or the heroine has turned to walk away (figuratively, at least), and it appears there will be no happy ending.

In her short contemporary *Expecting Lonergan's Baby*, Maureen Child shows us a heroine who faces the truth about her hero and, understanding his shortcomings, sends him away—even though it's the last thing she wants to do:

His features tightened and Maggie felt [Sam] emotionally withdraw. She wanted to cry but knew it wouldn't help. She wanted to reach him and knew that though he was standing right in front of her, he was further away from her than ever.

And just like that, a piece of her heart died. Swallowing back the tears gathering in her throat, she said only, "I don't want a husband who thinks it's his duty to marry me. ... I think it's best if you leave at the end of summer, just as you planned. I don't want you to be a part of the baby's life." ...

Then she turned and hurried across the moonlit yard to her own house. Stepping inside, she closed the door behind her and leaned back against it.

Knees weak, heart breaking, she closed her eyes and gave herself up to the pain.

Maggie understands that marrying the man she loves will lead only to his resentment of her. Refusing Sam's proposal isn't a ploy or an effort to manipulate him into changing; so far as she can see, it's the end of their relationship. And because the heroine has given up hope, the readers momentarily give up, too.

In order to be most effective, the black moment should arise naturally from the conflict and the plot, not be a manufactured confrontation or a misunderstanding. In this case, Sam is reluctant to commit himself because he blames himself for the long-ago death of a cousin; he is hesitant to accept so much responsibility again.

The black moment is often placed at the end of the next-to-last chapter, where it allows enough space for the readers to fully experience and understand the characters' pain. The black moment also serves to draw the readers into the rest of the book, and it gives the characters twenty pages or so to come to grips with the importance of what has happened to them and the changes they have made, and to finally sort out their difficulties.

THE SWITCH

Shortly after the black moment comes the *switch*, where the sorting out really starts.

The switch is the point at which one of the main characters reaches deep inside himself (or herself) and dredges up enough last-minute trust—or anger, or strength—to sacrifice his pride and share his honest feelings.

The switch thus turns the situation around completely, breaking the ice so the couple can ultimately resolve their differences. It's a very emotional point, a breakthrough that will allow the pair to live happily ever after.

In her single-title chick-lit *See Jane Score*, Rachel Gibson shows her heroine confessing to the hero why she authored a newspaper column to embarrass him:

“I’ve been thinking a lot this past week, and I’ve realized that in every relationship with a man that I’ve had, I’ve always entered an escape hatch just in case I might get hurt. The **Honey Pie** column was my escape hatch. Problem was, I didn’t get out fast enough.” She took a deep breath and slowly let it out. “I love you, Luc. I fell in love with you, and I was so afraid that you would never love me. Instead of thinking a relationship with you was doomed to end, I should have fought to keep it together. … It ended badly. I take the blame for that, and I’m sorry.” When he didn’t say anything, her heart plummeted further. There was nothing left to say except, “I was hoping we could still be friends.”… “You want to be friends?” “Yes.” “No.”

She’d never thought one little word could hurt so much. “I don’t want to be your friend, Jane.”

Jane makes her confession not in the hope of changing things between her and Luc, but because it’s the right thing to do. Gibson draws out the suspense as long as she can before Luc confesses the reason he doesn’t want to be friends—he wants more from Jane than friendship—and the lovers go on to talk about what has happened to separate them.

This important aspect of the switch, this painful sharing—honesty with no certainty of a good result—assures the readers that the relationship is important enough to both characters that they will not treat it lightly in the future, or endanger the love they’ve come so close to losing.

The switch usually takes place within the last ten pages of the book, leaving just enough room for tying up all the loose ends and for the readers to wallow in the satisfaction that this pair has finally made it to a happy ending.

DECLARING LOVE

After thousands of words and hundreds of pages in which the hero and heroine have been denying their feelings for each other, or at least not admitting them to

each other, it’s surprisingly difficult to make your main characters say things like “I love you” and “Will you marry me?” But it’s very important in the romance novel that they actually verbalize these feelings, not leave them to the readers to assume.

Both hero and heroine must actually declare their feelings, a proposal must be made and answered, and how these things are done must fit the main characters. A hero who has joked his way through the entire story may get serious at the end, but he won’t become somber—and even his most sincere proposal is likely to contain a touch of fun.

Tanya Michaels uses just such a touch of humor to finish off her romantic comedy *The Maid of Dishonor*.

“How do you feel about running off to Mexico to get married?”

Her heart stopped. “Are you … Was that a proposal?”

He snapped his fingers. “Damn. That wasn’t romantic at all, was it? And I can’t expect you to marry a man who doesn’t have his next job lined up yet. …”

She pressed her hand firmly against his mouth. When she had his attention, she enunciated slowly, “Was that a proposal?”

He nodded and asked beneath her fingers, “What do you say to Christmas in Cancun?”

She launched herself out of her chair and into his arms. “I say *si*, Señor Jenner.”

He pulled her to him, sealing their engagement with a hot, openmouthed kiss that left her knees trembling. Planning out the details would have to wait until later. Much later.

Since this couple’s courtship has been anything but ordinary, it’s fitting that the hero’s proposal is a bit of a tease as well.

The exception to the need for a declaration of love is in chick-lit, where the happy ending isn’t always a permanent commitment. Even there, however, it’s a good idea to show an increased level of trust or sharing between the main characters because of what they’ve been through together.

In her paranormal chick-lit novel *Undead and Unemployed*, Mary Janice Davidson leaves her vampire heroine uncertain of the hero’s exact feelings for her. Because the book is part of a series, making clear the status of the relationship between Betsy and Sinclair would reduce the zest of future books:

Jessica asked me about it, and Tina did, too, but Sinclair avoided the subject entirely, and I wasn’t sure why. I told them the truth—I didn’t remember much between getting staked, and Marc pulling the stake out.

What I didn’t tell them was the one thing I *did* remember: Sinclair’s voice floating out of the dark, coaxing, commanding, and saying the same thing over and over again: “Come back. Come back. Don’t leave me. Come back.”

Weird. And sometimes I wonder if I dreamed it. Or hallucinated it. Or, most amazing of all, if he really said it. God knows I wasn’t going to ask him. …

So either I can’t be killed, or the king of the undead brought me back by the sheer force of his will. Either way, something to think about.

But not today. Neiman’s is having a sale, and I desperately need a cashmere cardigan. I’d prefer red, but I’ll take any primary color. Jessica’s paying! She says it’s a “congratulations on coming back from the dead again” present. Works for me.

Though Davidson leaves the relationship unresolved, the strong hint of Sinclair’s deeper feelings will help draw the readers into the next book of the series. Notice that

despite having come close to oblivion, the heroine finishes the story with her signature sassy style, voice, and attachment to fashion, echoing earlier themes in the book.

FINDING THE RIGHT ENDING FOR YOUR ROMANCE

Inadequate endings come in many shapes and forms, but most of them fail to satisfy because they don't keep the emphasis on the main characters, or they show the characters acting inconsistently, or they tell rather than show the action. Some common inadequate endings include:

- **The drawing room ending.** The main character (or worse, a secondary character) assembles everyone together like the detective in an old mystery in order to explain what really happened. Explanation is far weaker than showing the characters taking action.
- **The surprise ending.** This ending will fall flat if the surprise isn't really startling or the readers have been able to anticipate it. If the story has been about saving a historic structure and in the last chapter the wealthy hero decides simply to buy it, there's not much novelty in the solution.
- **The going-off-on-a-tangent ending.** The ending has nothing to do with the rest of the story. If the entire story has been about whether the heroine should take a particular job or go back to school for her degree, *but* in the end she decides to sell everything and backpack around the world, the readers will be left scratching their heads and wondering where that idea came from.
- **The unresolved ending.** This ending leaves important issues or big points of disagreement hanging. If the big problem has been a disagreement between hero and heroine over whether to move across the country, but in the end the couple postpones the decision indefinitely, the readers won't be satisfied.
- **The assistance-from-outside ending.** Forces outside the main characters solve the problem when the hero and heroine should do it themselves. If the couple has been chasing a criminal, but it's the police who make the capture without the couple's involvement, the ending will feel limp. The ideal resolution would show both main characters deeply involved in bringing justice to the bad guy, even if the authorities are the ones who actually handcuff him and haul him away.
- **The brought-about-by-others ending.** Only the stage-managing of other characters forces the hero and heroine to set foot in the same room again. While secondary characters may be tangentially involved in the ending, it's best if the readers believe that eventually the heroic couple would have come together and settled their differences without interference. Unless it's clear that the hero and heroine work out their problems by themselves, it's tough to convince the readers that they can have a workable partnership over the long term.
- **The fate ending.** Fate or angels or the gods step in to solve the problem. Miracle cures of supposedly terminal illnesses fit in this category, as do villains who are conveniently killed in car accidents rather than being forced by the hero and heroine to face the consequences of their actions. The conclusion should come about as a direct result

of the main characters' actions.

Endings That Work

All satisfactory endings have something in common—they grow naturally out of elements that are already present in the story; they don't introduce new ideas or go off in new directions. For instance:

- **The circular ending.** This ending reveals a character's growth and development by exposing him anew to a situation or activity that occurred at the story's beginning and showing the difference in the character's reaction. For example, at the beginning of the story, the heroine walks down Chicago's Magnificent Mile, enjoying the city's bustle and noise. At the end, she takes the same walk, but because of the way she has changed over the course of the story, she now finds the bustle overwhelming and the noise intrusive.

- **The building-on-a-theme ending.** It can be very effective to drop a comment, question, or reference into the story at irregular intervals and then allow that same theme to form the ending. In Elizabeth Bevarly's single title *You've Got Mail*, her hero is a spy who has used multiple names but who refuses to utter his code name; he has even threatened the co-workers who know it, to keep them from actually using it:

“I love you, Dixon. I love you, Oliver. I love you no matter who you are or what you are or where you are. And I will love you forever.”

He lifted a hand to her face, cupping her jaw gently in his palm. “Binky,” he said. She narrowed her eyes at him.

“That’s my code name,” he told her, smiling. “Binky.”

She chuckled. “Hence the reason why no one lives to talk about it after saying it.” “You could say it and live,” he promised.

She lifted her hand to his face, too, brushing her fingertips over his *rough* beard. “*Nah, I kind of like you as Dixon*,” she said. She smiled. “But who knows what I might call out in a moment of heated passion.”

He quirked up one dark brow. “We could find out.” She nodded slowly. “Yes, we could.”

And in a moment of heated passion—several moments of heated passion, in fact—they did.

Since the hero’s code name has been such a big thing through the story, referred to a half-dozen times, his sharing it with the heroine is a unique expression of trust. The readers are reassured about the couple’s future, because if he’ll tell her that embarrassing bit of information, there will be no important things kept secret.

- **The unanticipated ending.** This ending offers a solution the readers don't see coming. If the readers can guess the compromise, the emotional appeal of the ending is minimized, and the readers are likely to think the characters should have figured this out long ago. But the effective surprise ending isn’t really a surprise when the readers stop to think about it—it’s simply an unexpected twist on a theme that was already present in the

story.

THE LAST LINE

The very end of the book—the last couple of paragraphs—is the place where even the most disciplined of writers is apt to slide into sloppy purple prose. Just as it's easy to start a story *too early*, it's also *tempting to go on too long in the end*. That perfect last line isn't easy to find—and in romances, authors have a tendency to get more sentimental, cloying, and sickly sweet with each sentence.

The last few lines should match the tone of the rest of the book. If the story has been frothy and humorous, then the last few lines should have that same upbeat, happy note. If the story has been dark and painful, then the last few lines should be very deep and emotional.

In her inspirational romance *Promise of Forever*, Patt Marr makes sure to draw the spiritual elements of the story into the ending:

His eyes roved her face, looking at her with all the love any woman could ask for. "It's your call, Beth. Do we elope and begin our life today or do we take time before making a lifetime commitment?"

"*Will you be upset if I say I'd like to pray about it?*"

"No," he said, smiling. "But I wish I'd thought of it first. It's my turn to pray." With her arms around Noah and her head on his chest, Beth marveled at Noah's words of surrender. This joy of being in the arms of the man she loved while he talked to the Lord ... it was all she had prayed for ... and *more*.

Since the hero's reluctance to put his faith in a higher power has been an issue for this couple throughout the story, bringing this thread into the ending adds a spiritual theme to the conflict resolution.

When you've written what you think is the last sentence, go back and look at the last page. The odds are you've written a stronger ending line five or six paragraphs back—one that is crisp and better suited to the story in tone and subject matter.

EPILOGUES

If either the hero or the heroine has given up something of enormous importance for the sake of the other, or if both have agreed to great changes in lifestyle in order to maintain the relationship, it may be a good idea to add an epilogue to show how things are working out after a period of time.

Another good use of an epilogue is when the story ends with the heroine pregnant—or when the conflict has included doubts over whether the couple can have children—in order to show the new arrival.

But an epilogue should not just show the new couple meeting all the family members and bring everyone's stories up to date. In her single title *The Backup Plan*, Sherryl Woods uses an epilogue to show that though her journalist heroine has stopped being a war correspondent in order to marry her hero, she hasn't given up the thrill of chasing a story:

Cord paced the back of the chapel, sweat beading on his brow. Where the devil was she? Had this whole wedding thing been too good to be true? Dinah was already twenty minutes late and nowhere in sight. ...

Just then he heard the roar of a motorcycle tearing through the Saturday afternoon downtown traffic. "Dear God in heaven," he said as the candy-apple-red motorcycle whipped around a corner with Tommy Lee driving and Dinah clinging to her brother for dear life.

"Sorry," she said, leaping off the back as it skidded to a halt in front of Cord. "I was covering a story outside of town and my car broke down. ..." "I was hoping to get married sometime today."

Dinah pressed a soothing kiss to his cheek. "Me, too," she assured him. "Give me ten minutes."

... Cord gave her a resigned look. "Is this the way it's always going to be? You're going to be chasing after some big story and nearly miss all the important occasions in our life?"

"I promise I'll be on time for the birth of our children," she teased. "Will that do?"

Though the heroine has given up a great deal for her hero, her attitude here and the fact that she's already established herself in a new job assures the readers that this woman won't resent or regret the decision she's made.

SEQUELS AND TRILOGIES

Even before you finish with the book, you may start thinking that some of your secondary characters are too interesting to leave behind. Do they deserve a story of their own?

It's hard enough to write one book at a time without also planning ahead for a sequel. But if you are intent on continuing your story, now—before the first book is set in stone—is a good time to do some thinking ahead. To prepare for a possible sequel:

- Make sure you haven't included any more specifics about the secondary characters in the first book than you absolutely need to use. By limiting the details you include in the original story, you leave yourself room to maneuver and to allow your new set of characters to grow.

- Give your sequel characters as heroic a persona as you can in the first book so they're worthy of being heroes and heroines in their own book. Best friends and family members can be tart without being nasty, which allows them to be useful secondary characters while preserving their heroic potential. Just don't tone them down so much they aren't able to function in the roles they play in the original story.

- Keep your eye on the ball. It's the first story that is important right now; if it doesn't sell, the second one in your series has *much less* chance of making it.



IN REVIEW: Studying Romantic Endings

1. Look back at the romance novels you've been studying and read the last few pages

of each one. Can you locate the black moment? The switch?

2. How does each ending relate to earlier elements in the book? Is the tone, the sensuality level, the humor similar to the rest of the story?

3. Does the ending hark back to the beginning of the story? Does it answer a question or use a theme the author has developed earlier in the rest of the story?



Creating Your Own Romantic Ending

1. What will be the black moment in your story when everything seems to be lost and there can't be a happy ending?

2. Which of your main characters will break that impasse and switch things around so there can be a happy resolution?

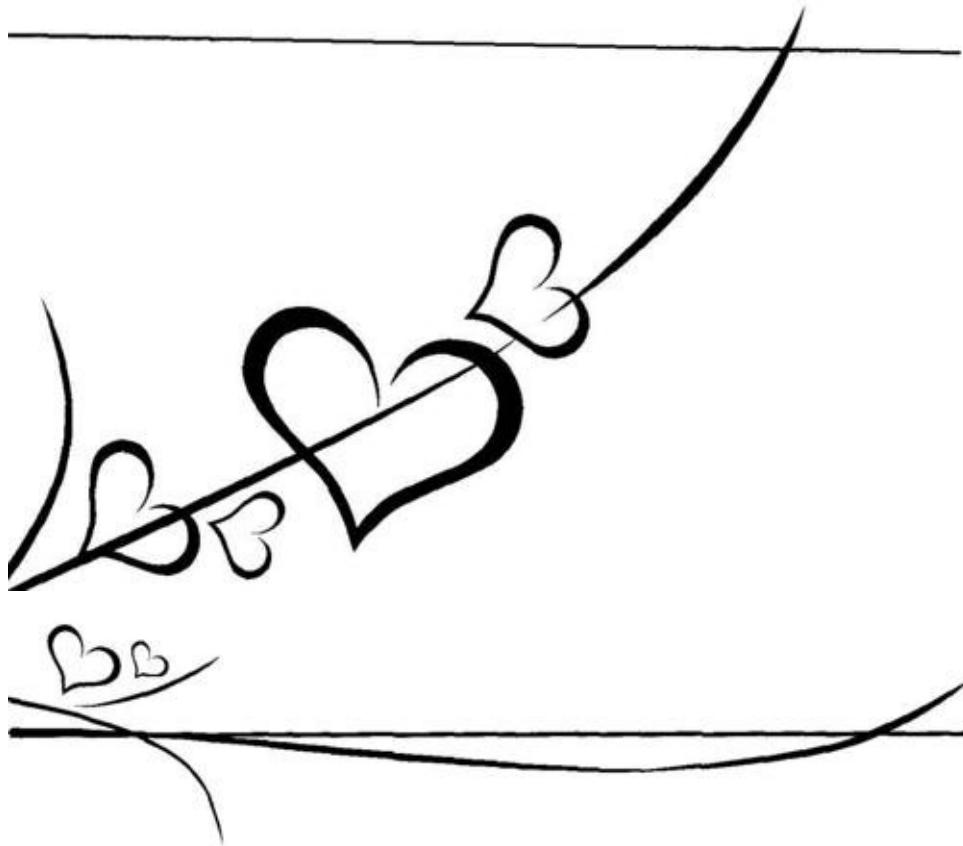
3. Will there be a proposal? How would your hero (or perhaps your heroine) propose?

4. How will your story end? Can you use elements from the beginning of your story to create a circular ending? Can you repeat thematic elements from throughout the story to bring events to a neat close, perhaps tying up one last loose end? Can you create a genuine surprise for your readers?

part four

Submitting Your

Romance Novel



chapter fifteen

Revising Your Manuscript



No matter how good a plan you had when you started writing your book, your first *draft* is likely to have problems, holes, inconsistencies, and spots where your characters did the unexpected and threw you off course. The story may have ended up shorter or longer than you thought it would. Or perhaps you've got the horrible feeling that something is off-kilter, but you're unable to deduce exactly what it is.

FIVE REASONS ROMANCES GO WRONG

If there is something wrong with your story, chances are it's one of the Big Five: (1)

inadequate conflict, (2) unrealistic characters, (3) lack of force, (4) focus not kept on the romance, or (5) poor writing.

In every unsuccessful romance novel I've ever read, one (or more) of these problems lies at the heart of the trouble:

1. There isn't really a conflict, or the conflict between the characters is a misunderstanding rather than a real disagreement about substantial issues. A story that features two people who are fighting their overwhelming attraction for each other, but doing nothing else, is unlikely to hold up for the necessary number of chapters.

If your hero, on the slimmest of evidence, jumps to the conclusion that your heroine is a slut, while your heroine reacts to the hero's first statement by writing him off as a bully, and they continue thinking of each other this way throughout the story, you have a misunderstanding but not a conflict.

Real conflict involves important issues. What's at stake? What do both hero and heroine want that only one of them can have? Or what do they both want so badly they have to work together to get it?

A real conflict has at least two realistic, believable, sympathetic sides—positions that reasonable human beings could logically take. If you (and the readers) can't argue from either POV changing sides from time to time as if you were a debater, then your conflict is one-sided and flat.

When you have real conflict, your characters will have lots to talk about. When you don't, they may argue till doomsday, but their conversation won't lead anywhere.

Symptoms of this malady include:

- **Characters who argue but don't simply talk to each other.** If explaining their positions would solve the problem in chapter one, then it's only a misunderstanding, not a conflict.

- **One side is presented as right and the other is presented as wrong.** If

one of them is trying to save the rain forest and the other takes glee in trying to destroy it, it's hard to be sympathetic to both sides.

- **Circular arguments.** The characters argue the same points again and again, without making progress toward a solution. If the conflict is genuine, a real discussion will develop and the antagonists will modify their points of view as they explain their positions.

- **Coincidental interruptions.** Just as the hero is about to explain what he really feels, the phone rings, or someone comes to the door, or another character happens to say something that perpetuates the wrong impressions—so the misunderstanding lives on for another day. A wrong number or someone asking for directions would not have the power to derail an important conversation.

- **Not enough at stake.** The issue doesn't seem important enough to deserve a story, either to the readers or to the characters. A difference between two teachers about how to

run a classroom, or a quarrel between parents about whether their little girl should wear jeans or dresses, isn't likely to keep the readers up at night to find out what happens.

- **Unrelated disasters.** Throwing in earthquakes, car accidents, broken bones, etc.—unless they are actually related to the main story—fills space but doesn't develop conflict or advance the plot. Does every incident move the story forward? Does every incident have a connection to the characters' goals?

- **Main characters whose every conversation consists of getting-to-know-each-other, first-date talk.** If the only thing the main characters have to chat about is pets and jobs, there may not be enough of a problem between them.

2. The hero and heroine aren't realistic and sympathetic characters, or they aren't behaving in realistic ways. If your heroine's past experience with the Other Woman has shown that the Other Woman is a liar, but the heroine believes her anyway, then your main character is not only illogical but downright aggravating.

If your hero and heroine act on their very first meeting as if they've known and hated each other for years, they're not believable characters. If they behave badly toward each other throughout the story without overwhelming reason, they're not sympathetic. If they show nothing but distaste for each other throughout the book but then fall into each other's arms on the last page, their chances of lasting happiness are not convincing. Symptoms of this malady include:

- **A heroine you wouldn't want to befriend.** If she isn't someone you'd want to hang out with, odds are your readers won't either. You may know that, down deep, your heroine is really a sweetheart, but if she spends all of chapter one shrieking at her mother, the readers will see an unsympathetic, unpleasant woman.

- **A hero you wouldn't want to be married to.** (Notice that I didn't say "a hero you wouldn't fall in love with." Being attracted to someone is one thing, but he has to be more than handsome and sexy to have lasting appeal.) If he's angry, have the readers seen convincing reasons for his anger? Can the readers empathize with the character's emotions? Does the bad boy show a balance of characteristics, or is he so dangerous that a sensible woman would run?

- **Characters who are out of balance.** If the hero is aggressive and the heroine weak, or the heroine is pushy and the hero passive, the story is apt to trail off. In a good pairing of characters, the hero and heroine will be roughly equal in strength and assertiveness.

- **Telling the readers about the characters rather than showing them in action.** If the characters are not realistic, sympathetic, and believable, it will be difficult to bring them to life—and thus easier to write *about* them than to show them interacting.

- **Unmotivated opposition.** The hero shouldn't try to prevent the heroine from getting what she wants (or vice versa) simply to be nasty. Both characters are more sympathetic if there's a good reason for their opposition to each other.

- **A wandering or unclear viewpoint.** It's hard to take in more than one character's thoughts at a time, especially if it isn't clear to the readers whose head they're supposed to

be in. The result of an unclear viewpoint is often a lack of sympathy for all the characters.

- **Too much internalization.** The readers hear all about the character's thoughts—more than they want to—but they don't have any real reason to care.

- **Cutting sarcasm, or arguments that are filled with anger to the exclusion of opinions, logic, and respect.** When name-calling takes the place of discussion, it's hard to like any of the people involved.

3. There isn't anything forcing the main characters to stay in the situation.

If he dislikes her (even though he thinks she has a great body) and she detests him (even though he's quite a hunk), there isn't anything preventing one or the other from just walking away. What makes it necessary for them to stay in contact long enough to discover that their attraction to each other is really love? If you can't state in one sentence the reason your hero and heroine need each other, that reason needs redefining.

Symptoms of this malady include:

- **A hero and heroine who have very little to say to each other.** If there's something forcing them to stay together, they'll have that issue to talk about. If they're talking about nothing, maybe they need more of a reason to be together in the first place.

- **Characters who are motivated to oppose each other by petty irritation rather than by real disagreement.** Are they just sniping at each other rather than discussing a substantial problem? If they pick at each other rather than talk about opinions and feelings and events, there may be no reason for them to be together.

- **Characters who are too cozy and comfortable together.** If they get along so well, what's keeping them from solving the main problem?

- **A hero and heroine who are often separated instead of in the same physical space.** When they're not together, there's no interaction—so the lack of something to talk about may not be obvious. And if they're not together, perhaps it's because there's no reason for them to spend time with each other.

4. The romance is not kept at the heart of the book. The other parts of the novel—the mystery of the missing money, the child in need, the past history of hero or heroine, the subplot involving secondary characters—are sometimes more fun and are often easier to write than the immediate interaction between the main characters.

But the readers want to see a developing relationship—fondness, trust, liking—between the characters. The rest of the story, important though it is, serves as the background for the romance.

Symptoms of this malady include:

- **Main characters who don't seem to have anything to talk about.** People who are interested in each other will be asking questions, exploring opinions, and finding out more about the other person.

- **Main characters who argue rather than just talk.** Even characters who are very

much opposed to each other will—if they’re honestly interested in each other—try to find some common ground, something they can talk about *without* arguing.

- **A hero and heroine often separated by the circumstances of the plot.** *If*

the hero and heroine are apart, thinking about each other rather than being actively involved, their feelings for each other can’t develop.

- **Overly complex plots.** Too many events or too much space spent explaining the details of subplots means less time for the developing relationship.

- **Too many people in the scenes.** If the hero and heroine aren’t alone together, it’s more difficult for their feelings to develop. Even in a packed auditorium you can isolate your two main characters; move them off to a corner, or let them carry on a whispered private exchange while surrounded by other people.

- **Scenes that veer off track.** Side issues become more important than the main story, and everybody—author, characters, and readers—forgets what the point of the scene was. Or the family history and in-depth views of secondary characters distract readers from the main story.

- **Interference by other characters.** Whether the interference is intended to create trouble between the hero and heroine or bring them together, it takes the focus off the main relationship. The hero and heroine should solve their own problems.

5. **The story simply isn’t well told.** You haven’t put words on the page in a spellbinding way. Perhaps you’re summarizing your story, telling instead of showing. Or the sentences may simply be unclear, so the readers have to deduce or interpret what you mean. You may show the action in the wrong order, confusing the readers. Or maybe you’re showing only part of the scene, leaving out details necessary for the readers’ understanding. For whatever reason, the actual words on the paper do not convey to the readers the images you saw as you wrote. Symptoms of this malady include:

- **Slow starts.** The first chapter might consist of the heroine reflecting on her past and what has brought her to this stage in her life. If you start with action

instead, you give the readers a reason to care about the character; then they’ll sit still to hear about the roots of the problem.

- **Peaceful endings.** Chapters or scenes that end with the heroine drifting off to sleep without a care are wonderful places for the readers to do the same thing.

- **Rushed dramatic action.** Watch out for words and phrases like *later, after a few minutes, when she’d had a chance to think it over*, and other indications that the readers are being told rather than shown what happened.

- **Low emotional levels.** When the story events and characters are not emotionally compelling, the readers find it difficult to care whether the hero and heroine get what they want.

- **Wandering viewpoints.** The POV shifts back and forth for no good reason, or it’s

difficult even to figure out who the viewpoint character is.

- **Random dialogue.** Instead of relaying important information, the dialogue focuses on everyday detail—lots of instances of *hello* and *good-bye* and *How do you like your coffee?*

- **One-sided characters.** It's easy to show the difficult, angry side of a character and assume the readers will know that the guy's really delightful underneath—because after all, he's the hero.

- **Below-standard grammar, spelling, word usage, and mechanics.** Anything that takes the readers' attention off the story and forces them to figure out what the author really meant makes it easier for them to put the book down.

DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEMS

If you can, put your story away for a few days—even a few weeks—before you start to revise. When you read it again after a break, you'll be better able to judge what works and what doesn't. And you'll be more likely to see whether the words on the page actually evoke the meaning you intended to share with your readers.

When it's time to take a look at what you've written, to figure out what's working and what isn't, and to create a plan of attack for revising, use the checklist below as you reread your work.

This in-depth checklist covers all the main sections of the romance novel and will help you spot areas where you've lost the thread of your story, told too much too soon, or left out crucial information or steps in the development of the plot or relationship. You can use this list at any stage in the writing process to help keep you on track, or as a guideline when you've finished the manuscript.

The more you can distance yourself from your story and pretend that someone else wrote it, the better this checklist will work for you. Try pretending that you're a book reviewer and you will have to give not only your reaction to the story but the reasons for your opinions.

- How does the story start? What do the readers know about the main character by the end of chapter one? What do the readers not know and want to? What do the readers know that they don't need or want to?

- *How many pages into the book* does the plot action begin? When do the readers meet the second main character?

- What forces the hero and heroine to stay in the situation? If being around each other makes them unhappy, why doesn't one of them just go away?

- What keeps the hero and heroine apart? Could their disagreement be solved if they sat down for a real conversation?

- Is the conflict personal? Sympathetic? Important to the characters and the readers? Can the readers picture themselves or someone they love caught up in a similar difficulty?

- Is the disagreement between the main *characters* *strong* enough to keep them apart despite their attraction?

- How much do the readers know about what both the hero and heroine are thinking? At what point in the story do the readers know that the heroine is seriously interested in the hero? At what point in the story do the readers know that the hero is seriously interested in the heroine? *After* this point, is the excitement level in the story maintained, or does it drop off?

- Do the readers get to savor the excitement? Listen to the arguments? Watch the action? Or is the dramatic potential of the story summarized?

- By the halfway point of the book, have the readers met all the major secondary characters? If all the characters haven't actually appeared on stage, have you told the readers about them?

- How many secondary characters are there? Can some of them be eliminated or combined? Can some of them be reduced to labels—*the waitress, the receptionist*—instead of names and descriptions? How much do the readers know about secondary characters, and is this information important to the story?

- Are the main characters' actions and words consistent with their personalities, their professions, their upbringing, and their previous experiences?

- Is the POV consistent throughout the story? If a second or third POV is used, does it appear early and with some regularity throughout the story? Do the points of view of secondary characters creep in where they shouldn't?

- Does each scene and each chapter begin by setting up the location and time frame, identifying the viewpoint character, *and* creating an interesting hook? Does each scene and each chapter end at a point of interest, where the readers will find it difficult to stop reading?

- Of the total number of pages in the manuscript, how many show the hero and heroine interacting together? How many show them in the same room but not interacting?

- What is the longest time (in page count) that the hero and heroine are separated?

- Do the readers see a relationship developing between hero and heroine? How much time—how many pages—do they spend kissing, flirting, making love? Fighting? Just talking? Do the hero and heroine get cozy too quickly?

- Are the love scenes appropriate to the type of romance? To the personalities of the characters? To their circumstances (for instance, to the amount of privacy the couple has)?

- Is sexual tension maintained throughout the story? When do the readers see attraction between the characters? Is the sexual tension diminished or increased by the love scenes?

- *Do* the main characters themselves bring about the ending without the interference or manipulation of other characters? How do they do so?

- Is the ending satisfying? Are the good guys rewarded and the bad guys punished?

Are all the loose ends tied up and all the puzzles solved?



Answer the checklist questions for one of the romance novels you've read. Analyzing another author's book will help you to understand how the author *structured* her book, and why. It will also help you see how the checklist questions can be applied to your own work.

REVISING

Revising your work is easier if you approach it as a completely separate step from writing. Everyone's working style is slightly different, but here are some things

to keep in mind as you're writing the first draft—things that may make the eventual revision go more easily:

- **Write straight through your project, without stopping to revise.** Reading through what you wrote in the previous session can help you warm up and get started again. Noting typos or inconsistencies as you read is fine, but try not to get caught up in making major changes.

- **Make note of potential changes.** If you think of something that should have been included in chapter two, but you're already in chapter four, write yourself a note and put it in a separate file to consult when you get to the revision stage. If you go back to actually do the work, you'll lose forward momentum—and you may find in the end that the brilliant new idea wasn't as good as it seemed.

- **Just write the story.** Don't fret about finding exactly the right comparison, and don't worry about making every single line of dialogue sparkle. That's what second drafts are for. Nobody but you will see the first draft (unless you choose to share it), so it doesn't matter if it's not up to publishable standards.

THE REVISER'S SELF-HELP TOOL KIT

What works for one writer isn't always the best solution for another. But here's a basic plan for you to consider and try, and then adapt to suit your working style:

- **Give yourself a break.** Don't try to write and edit in the same session. The two jobs are very different, and trying to switch back and forth can drive you crazy and make you think there's something wrong with a section that in fact is perfectly fine.

- **Give it a rest.** Let your writing sit for a few days, if you can—without looking at it—before you try to decide what's good and not-so-good about it. The more distance you gain *from the writing*, the more able you'll be to look at it strictly from the readers' perspective.

- **Work on a hard copy.** A rare few people can edit efficiently on the computer screen, but for most of us the words have more reality when they're printed on paper. Working from a hard copy makes it easier to flip back and forth

to compare or to review changes you've already made. Hard copy feels more final and

more important—and typos and other errors stand out more clearly on paper than on the screen.

- **Read it fast.** When in doubt about whether a story is working, lock up your pens and just read it straight through. The goal is to absorb the whole story

so inconsistencies and plot holes can't elude you. (I often take the manuscript onto the treadmill. Since I can't make notes while I'm walking, I'm forced to just read, without fiddling and getting distracted by details.) After you've finished reading, think about how you reacted as a reader to your book.

- **Read it onto tape.** The act of reading a section aloud will tell you whether your dialogue is natural (if it isn't, you'll feel stiff or find yourself changing the words). Listening to the tape will help you discern whether the story pacing is good, the characters are likeable, and the POV is clear. If you were listening to this tale as you drove across the country, would it keep you on your toes or put you to sleep?

- **Get out your colored markers.** The more the merrier. Highlight dialogue with one color, introspection with a second, narrative with a third, attributions with a fourth, description with a fifth. You'll quickly see whether you've overdone the storytelling, internalization, attribution, or description, and whether the proportions of each in the manuscript are right. If the book feels as if it's dragging, the highlighter test may show that you have lots of dialogue in the first half of the book but much less in the last half.

- **Set aside a block of time.** Go through the manuscript page by page to actually make your changes. If you can do it in a few sittings, you'll be better able to remember the details than if you work over a period of a month.

GETTING HELP

Getting advice from other writers, romance readers, or contest judges can be very helpful, but sorting out the useful feedback may not be easy. Trying to apply all the suggestions is a sure recipe for mental breakdown; every critiquer will have a different opinion, and sometimes they will collide.

When you're weighing feedback, separate the suggestions about the story (comments such as "convoluted plot" or "inconsistent characters") from suggestions about the presentation ("not enough dialogue," "too much introspection"). Look at the big picture first—does your story work?—before considering feedback about the way you've told the story.

Consider each piece of advice and look for common themes in the feedback before deciding what to do. If one reader says she doesn't like your heroine, maybe the reader just has a hang-up with that sort of woman. But if several separate readers tell you they don't like your heroine, then it's wise to take a look at how you've presented her and whether you can show some additional positive attributes.

Writers' Groups

Nothing is more reassuring than a group of people who share a common interest in writing, people—published or not—who understand the frustrations of writing because

they, too, have dealt with uncooperative characters and illogical plots.

But not all amateur writers' groups are equally good, supportive, or positive. Positive doesn't mean that a group should give only praise; real improvement comes from uncovering flaws as well as recognizing strong points to build on.

Some groups have a positive energy. Members are encouraged; they celebrate success; they cooperate to improve the work of all members; and they take the differing needs of each member into account when offering feedback. (For *some* writers, feel-good applause is very important. Others feel they're accomplishing far more than they really are if they receive praise for each baby step.)

Other groups have a negative energy. Members may feel suspicious of success, and they may compete. Some writers need exactly that challenge, but for others the negative spin is the kiss of death.

Take your time before joining a writers' group. Visit, listen, and, if the group shares work, begin by sharing a piece that you're not emotionally attached to in case the feedback is harsh rather than helpful.

Do you feel supported by the other members? Do you feel welcome and able to ask questions? Are the programs helpful to you and worth the time spent in meetings?

Make sure the writers' group you join is composed of writers. Many groups are composed, instead, of talkers—people who say they want to write, or people who may have written at one time but who aren't actually producing pages of manuscript at the moment. While those people can be insightful about writing, editing, and publishing, they aren't facing the same challenges as those who are actively writing.

It's helpful if the group is knowledgeable about your field. A romance writer joining a group of poets is unlikely to get useful feedback. But a group that is too specific (for example, romance writers specializing in Civil War-era stories) can get so caught up in checking detail that they miss the obvious (perhaps getting the size of the hoopskirt right to the millimeter but failing to notice *that* the heroine is acting illogically).

Critique Groups

Critique groups are often a subset of writers' groups; within the total membership, a smaller group of people with similar interests and goals meets for the sole *purpose* of sharing work and giving feedback.

Critique and criticism are not the same thing. Criticism tells you what's wrong, Critique addresses weak spots, but at the same time points out strengths that the writer can build on. Critique that focuses on the good without taking weaknesses into account, however, is hopeful rather than helpful.

Trust your gut feelings. Does the feedback you receive give you new insights? Does it leave you feeling that you now have ideas on how to improve your work? Are you confident that you're capable of applying what you've learned?

Critique groups vary in structure, size, goals, experience level, and frequency of

meetings. Some meet weekly, some monthly. Some meet in members' homes, some in public rooms. Some allow a floating membership, others are small groups that do not easily excuse absence and only occasionally invite new members to join. Some require new members to listen for a few sessions before offering an opinion or putting forward their own work for critique.

Sometimes critique groups remain too static. If everyone gets to know the author's story just as well as the author does, the group may lose its objectivity and stop learning. While there is no magic number for the life span of a critique group, it's unlikely that any group will remain healthy and useful forever.

Whatever the structure of the group, make sure it fits with your goals. What are you seeking from a critique group, and how does this group fit into your life and writing style? Are others in the group writing in the same genre or category as you are? If not, do they have wide reading experience? If you're writing his-toricals, a group of people who read and write only contemporary romances will be of considerably less help to you than a group familiar with the special requirements of historical fiction.

Critique groups that include published members may be of more practical assistance than those that involve only prospective authors. But publication does not guarantee that a member's advice will be helpful. More important is whether the group works with the writer's own strengths. Critique groups have been known to ruin work by offering too many bits of conflicting advice or by trying to turn the story into what someone else would prefer; it can be difficult to sort the helpful feedback from suggestions that lead only to deeper confusion.

Professional Groups

Romance Writers of America (www.rwanational.org) is a professional organization open to published and unpublished writers of romance fiction, as well as to editors, agents, booksellers, and others interested in the field. It is one of the few organizations for professional writers that welcomes the unpublished into membership and is open to writers around the world.

The organization provides its members with a monthly magazine, offers annual contests for published and unpublished writers, and holds an annual conference where writers can meet with editors and agents, network with other writers, and attend workshops and seminars.

RWA chapters are local branches of the national organization. Most major American cities have chapters, and there are online chapters for special-interest groups or members who can't easily attend a local chapter meeting. Writers must belong to the national organization in order to join a local chapter. Each chapter has considerable autonomy, within RWA's requirements, to organize itself and run its meetings to best serve its own members. Many hold monthly meetings that include a speaker or demonstration or exercise. Many sponsor critique groups that meet separately from the chapter meetings. Some sponsor contests or hold local or regional conferences.

In the United Kingdom, the Romantic Novelists' Association (www.rna-uk.org) is a

group of more than seven hundred members promoting romantic fiction from category romance to women's fiction. RNA is open to published and unpublished writers, agents, editors, publishers, booksellers, etc., and offers contests and conferences.

Romance Writers of Australia (www.romanceaustralia.com) is open to published and unpublished writers from around the world, as well as others interested in romance fiction. It offers contests, conferences, and a program where writers who are isolated and unable to attend meetings are matched with mentors.

Your library will probably have a listing of other national and local professional organizations for writers. Each will have different requirements for membership and offer different benefits.

Contests

Writing contests provide encouragement; incentive to meet deadlines; practice in accepting feedback and failure; and great benefits to finalists and winners, including a credit that can be included in future letters to publishers and useful in getting an editor's attention.

But contests can also be expensive. Between entry fees, copying costs, and postage, you can easily rack up a hundred dollars in expenses for each contest you enter.

And contests can be dangerous. Because many of them require the submission of a first chapter only, some writers go no further—they write and polish the first twenty-five pages, then go on to the next contest entry without ever finishing a project. Writers who become contest-addicted may never write an entire book.

The contests that are most useful to a new writer are those that encourage judges to write comments directly on the manuscript. Most such contests promote this aspect in their advertising. Contests that provide only a score with no comments are much less helpful to the writer who doesn't happen to place in the finals.

Choose your contests *carefully, and limit how many you enter. Be prepared to receive wildly varying scores; if five judges look at your manuscript, you may find*

that two love it, one hates it, and two are lukewarm. Judges' opinions are personal and subjective. If, however, several of them comment about the same things—either positive or negative—you'll have a good indication of the strengths and weaknesses of your manuscript, no matter what your final score.

Commercial publishers occasionally run contests, often when they're revamping a line (or opening a new one) and wish to attract attention and submissions. Usually these contests do not charge an entry fee.

The RWA's monthly magazine, *Romance Writers Report*, lists reputable contests, as does *Writer's Digest* magazine. Most romance-writing contests are sponsored by RWA chapters and therefore abide by RWA's rules and ethical code for contest practices.

Some authors offer contests, usually accepting entries by e-mail, as part of a promotional campaign for their own books and Web sites. Usually there is no fee, but

there are often nice prizes in addition to attention from editors or agents as well as readers. Writers' e-mail loops, chat rooms, and discussion groups often pass the word about these contests.

A few writing contests are scams in which every contestant is named a winner and invited to buy an anthology of entries. Though these are more common in poetry and short story writing than in romance, it's wise to check that the contest sponsor is reputable.

Critiquing and Editing Services

Critiquing and editing services work with your manuscript-in-progress, advising you about strengths and weaknesses, sometimes brainstorming ideas, and helping you shape your work to fit the marketplace. The value of a critique depends on the experience of the person providing it.

The freelance editors offering their assistance through ads in writers' magazines are often experienced, insightful, and very helpful in making a book salable. Many have worked for the same publishers you're trying to submit your work to, either as authors or editors, and their advice can be invaluable.

Others are more interested in the numbers on your check than in anything else you compose.

Ask for—and check out—references. Ask who will actually critique your work, and what that person's credentials are. Ask how long the editor has been in the business. Ask which publishers she has worked with. Ask whether manuscripts she's edited have subsequently sold, and which publishers bought them. Check the going rates for editing before agreeing to a fee.

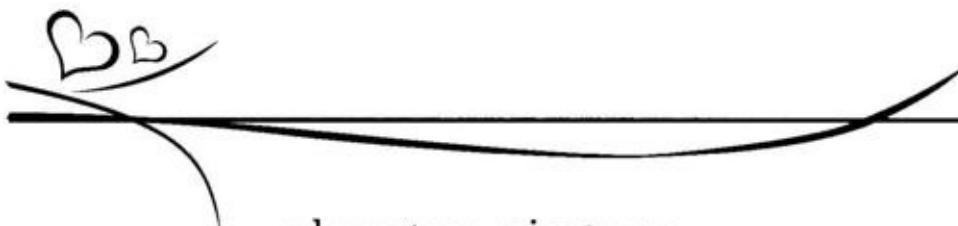
Make sure the terms of any agreement are clearly spelled out in writing. And don't ever pay out money that you can't afford to lose entirely.

Writing Classes

The best writing classes are usually taught by people who themselves are actively writing. Before choosing a class, consider the teacher's strengths and experience, and think about what you want to get from the class.

Which class is right for you depends on what sort of feedback you need at the time. A college class in creative writing may improve your characterization, but if the instructor is not familiar with the romance genre, the class isn't likely to be of great assistance in the finer points of polishing your romance novel.

Online classes have opened up the classroom to people around the world, no matter what their schedules or other obligations may be. *Writer's Digest* (www.writersonlineworkshops.com) and Gotham Writers' Workshop (www.writingclasses.com) offer classes on the Internet. Some RWA groups offer online classes, as well.



chapter sixteen

Marketing Your Romance Novel



Finishing your book is actually only the beginning. The publisher isn't likely to show up on your doorstep asking to see it, so it's up to you to target a market and make a sale.

Legend has it that, when Margaret Mitchell contacted a publisher about *Gone With the Wind*, she hauled two stacks of manuscript pages as tall as she was into the publisher's hotel room and said, "Here it is." Part of the manuscript was typed, part was handwritten, some pages were drenched in spilled coffee, and some chapters were included in multiple versions.

Today, she'd probably be politely asked to haul it all home, boil it down to a two-page query letter, and get an agent.

These days, almost no publisher will read the entire book right up front. They haven't time, so instead they ask to see summaries. If the summary intrigues them, they'll ask to see a section. If they like the section, they'll ask to see the whole manuscript. The likelihood is that, even if they like the manuscript, they'll ask for revisions—and only then will there be any discussion of actually buying the book. (Books are seldom sold until the publisher has seen the entire manuscript. If it's the author's first work of fiction, it almost certainly won't get a firm offer unless it's finished and ready to publish.)

The business aspects of writing and publishing are complex and can be scary. In this chapter, we'll hit the high spots of marketing—deciding on an agent, researching a publisher, writing a query, constructing a synopsis, submitting a proposal, interpreting an editor's letter, and making a deal.

ABOUT AGENTS

In some cases, having an agent to act for you in selling your work is absolutely necessary. In others cases, it's possible to act for yourself.

Do You Need an Agent?

If you want to write single-title or mainstream books, you must be represented by an agent in order to be considered by publishers. Most publishers of these kinds of books will only look at submissions that have already convinced an agent of their worth. A

manuscript submitted by an author directly to these publishers will most often be returned unread.

If you want to write category romance, you do not need an agent. Publishers of category romance are among the few in the book business that still read un-agented and unsolicited submissions.

Do You Want an Agent?

Even if you don't strictly need an agent to represent you, you may still want one.

If you want to concentrate on writing, an agent can help to steer you through the maze of financial and contract details.

If you aren't sure where your writing strengths lie, or if you want to write more than one type of book or work with more than one publisher, then having an agent who can help to guide your career can be an enormous advantage.

On the other hand, if you have an aptitude for reading legal fine print and educating yourself on the industry, and you can keep business (i.e., money) discussions separate from editorial considerations, you may be better off without an agent—especially if you're the sort who will be checking and second-guessing every decision the agent makes. You can be far more attentive to the details of your career than an agent who is simultaneously handling a number of writers.

Contracts for category romances are fairly standard, without much room for negotiation, so you can feasibly act for yourself. While an agent might negotiate a higher advance, it's unlikely that the long-term payout of a category book will be much improved by having an agent. (Keep in mind that if you negotiate the contract yourself, you won't have to pay the agent's fees.) Contracts can be complicated, however, so an agent's advice can be invaluable in preserving your rights and protecting you from unpleasant surprises down the road, especially if you want to move into other fields in the future.

Whether or not you have an agent, don't sign any agreement you haven't read or don't completely understand.

SPLITTING THE DIFFERENCE

Since finding an agent to act for you in selling your work is often just as difficult as selling a manuscript directly to a publisher, many writers of category romance submit to publishers and agents simultaneously. If a publisher shows interest in a manuscript, the author can then go to an agent and ask the agent to negotiate the details of the deal.

If you've submitted directly and an editor is interested, the call will of course come to you; if you plan to hire an agent, be careful not to agree to terms that might limit the agent's ability to negotiate for you.



Finding an Agent

Locating an agent is easy; there are thousands of them. Finding one that's right for you is much more difficult—and having the wrong agent is in many cases worse than having no agent at all. If your agent doesn't understand romance or know the difference between category and single title, he will send your book to all the wrong places.

You can find agents who specialize in romance by consulting the Web site of the Association of Authors' Representatives (AAR) at www.aar-online.org and searching its database. Agents who belong to AAR agree to follow the organization's code of ethics, which is also posted on the Web site.

Literary Market Place, a directory of the publishing industry available at most libraries, includes agent listings. Writer's Digest Books updates its directory of agents, *Guide to Literary Agents*, every year.

Romance Writers of America lists agents in a members-only section of their Web site (www.rwanational.org) and periodically in their magazine *Romance Writers Report*. RWA also maintains a list of agents with whom members have reported problems.

Most agents have Web sites, which give more information about the services they offer and the kinds of books they prefer to represent.

Agents attend many romance conferences and seminars, and most accept appointments with writers who wish to pitch their story ideas. If an agent is interested in a book, he will generally invite the author to send more material for review before agreeing to represent her.

Taking Care of Yourself

It can be so difficult to get an agent interested in your career that, once you do find an agent, you feel like he's doing you a big favor by representing you. Don't forget that the agent works for you, not the other way around. Don't hesitate to ask questions before signing with an agent. For example, consider asking:

- Which publishers has the agent sold to in the last year, and how many sales has he made?
- Is the agent knowledgeable about the kind of book you're writing, and does he have relationships with the publishers you want to sell to?
- Is the agent a member of the Association of Authors' Representatives (AAR)? (No licensing is necessary to be an agent, but membership in the national organization is a strong indication of professionalism.)
- What other agencies or publishers has the agent worked for?
- How long has he been an agent?
- How many clients does he handle?
- Who would be handling your work—the agent himself or an assistant?
- How does the agent view his job—does he provide editorial input and career guidance, or concentrate on selling? Does his philosophy fit with your needs?

Finally, be sure to get your agreement in writing, and make sure there's an out clause that provides a reasonable way to conclude the partnership in case the two of you don't work as well together as you'd hoped.

An Agent's Fees

An agent is paid when the author is paid. Usually, the publisher sends a check to the agent, who takes out his percentage (usually 15 percent) and forwards the rest to the author. Some publishers split checks and send each party's percentage directly.

Though some agents absorb the costs of phone calls, courier service, photocopying, etc., it is more common for an agent to charge the author for the out-of-pocket expenses he has incurred in selling a book. An ethical agent itemizes those charges and deducts them from the author's check—the agent should not charge the author before the author has been paid.

Some agents ask authors to pay a fee in advance to cover the costs of submitting a manuscript. This practice is not approved by the AAR and agents who do this are not allowed to join the AAR. An agent who asks for expenses to be paid up front may be perfectly legitimate, but some have been exposed as scam artists

who collect submission fees but do not seriously market the work—it's prudent to avoid agents who ask for fees up front.

A few agents charge a monthly fee for representation. This provides an incentive for the agent to keep your work dangling as long as possible, rather than try to sell it. This practice is also not approved by the AAR, and agents who charge such fees are not allowed to belong to the AAR. Authors should avoid such agents.

If the agent is paid and reimbursed for expenses only when he sells the work, he has an incentive to try harder.

In no circumstances should you pay an agent a fee to read and consider your work. That's the agent's job—to read submissions and select the ones he feels he can sell.

TARGETING A PUBLISHER DIRECTLY

It can be a challenge to decide where your book fits among the many categories and types of romances, and among the many publishers. Reading publishers' editorial guidelines can help but won't necessarily provide a clear answer. For instance, there's a distinct difference between a Harlequin Superromance and a Silhouette Special Edition, but their word counts are similar, and some of the descriptions in their editorial guidelines (or tip sheets) make them sound quite a lot alike.

In fact, many tip sheets are purposely written in very general terms. Here are some snippets *from the* many Harlequin/Silhouette tip sheets:

- "We're looking for energetic writing and well-constructed plots based on contemporary, credible, appealing characters."
- "Writers can push the boundaries in terms of characterization, plot, and ex-

plicitness.”

- “Set in small towns and big cities, on ranches and in the wilderness, from Texas to Alaska—everywhere people live and love.”
- “As wide as the world itself.”
- “Submissions should have a very contemporary feel.”
- “We are looking for fresh new voices, so the ability to take popular emotional themes and develop them through innovative, dramatic, and compelling storytelling is an important factor in getting published.”

The editors who write these guidelines are trying to differentiate one category from another without defining a formula that would unnecessarily restrict submissions. Unfortunately, the resulting tip sheets are full of general statements of limited use to the writer.

When reading a tip sheet, look for specifics, which in many cases are negative. The line that says its romances take place “from Texas to Alaska” isn’t going to be interested in a story set in Polynesia; a line that asks for “highly emotional” work isn’t going to buy romantic comedy. If the editors say they’re looking for “girl-next-door,” your princess need not apply, but if they’re looking for “glitzy,” a second-grade teacher isn’t going to get past the first reader.

Not all publishers offer tip sheets. If a publisher does offer guidelines, you can download them from the publisher’s Web site, or send a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) to the address given in published books.

Joining a professional organization, such as the Romance Writers of America, will give you access to up-to-date marketing news: notification of new category launches, shifts in what a particular category is looking to buy, and changes in editorial staff.

Researching Potential Publishers

The best way to learn who is publishing specific kinds of romance novels is to read the books that are being published today. Check out the bookshelves, note the publishers, then look at the publishers’ Web sites for guidelines and tip sheets, word counts, what to submit, and any recent changes in what the editors are seeking.

As you read a publisher’s current titles, look at length, tone, setting, level of sensuality, number of subplots, types of issues faced by the characters, etc. Look, too, for the newer authors. Established authors who have developed a core readership are sometimes allowed more latitude, but the first book by a new author is a good clue to what the publisher is most likely to buy from another new author—you.

Sending your manuscript to a publisher whose books are very different from yours is a waste of time and postage. More importantly, it clearly indicates that you haven’t bothered to do your homework and are uninformed about the romance genre.

Broadcasting your submissions—sending query letters to all the lines—is just as

useless. Each line is unique; while any particular idea or manuscript might be tweaked in such a way that it would fit more than just one line, it cannot possibly fit ten or fifteen different lines.

Getting a Publisher's Attention: Pitching a Story in Person

There are two main ways to bring your work to the attention of a publisher: sending in a submission package, which we'll discuss in greater detail later in the chapter, and meeting face-to-face with an editor and pitching your book in

person. Even if you meet with an editor in person, you will almost always submit your manuscript by mail. However, a personal meeting with an editor can speed the acceptance process.

One of the main draws of good writers' conferences is the editors who attend. You can get first-hand information about what an editor is seeking and in which direction a publisher is moving by attending an editor's workshops or panels.

Even when attending conferences, getting face time with an editor is not easy. Sometimes an editor will offer group appointments, in which several writers can ask more specific and in-depth questions than can be answered during a panel. You can get valuable information and guidance from a group session, even though you won't be able to discuss your individual work.

Pitching Your Idea in Person

At many conferences, editors also offer individual appointments, ten- or fifteen-minute segments where you can make a pitch, presenting your story in brief. If the editor is intrigued, she might ask you to send a synopsis or sample chapters to her after the conference.

Even if she's not interested in seeing more, she can often tell you exactly how you've missed the mark—valuable information that is difficult to get any other way.

Many authors are intimidated by meeting an editor during one of these fifteen-minute appointments. Partly because these appointments are so brief, and partly because they're so valuable, writers tend to treat them as once-in-a-life-time, do-or-die moments—like walking in to *the arena* with a *man-eating* tiger.

Contrary to popular opinion, however, editors are not man-eating tigers wearing power suits. They do not take pleasure in squashing wannabes. Their job is to find good, salable books, and they're pleased when they succeed. When you make a pitch to an editor, she's just as hopeful as you are that your book will be the one she can't wait to read.

Fifteen minutes can feel like a lifetime. It can also go by in a flash. The better prepared you are, the more useful your time will be. If you think of your pitch appointment in the same way you would think of a job interview, you won't go far wrong, but there are some specific ways to make the most of your appointment:

- Give the editor your business card.
- Don't waste time telling the editor how nervous you are.

- Have your materials ready so you don't have to fumble for your notes.
 - Write down on a 3 x 5 card the main points you want to make. Even if you know your story by heart, the moment you walk into that room you'll be lucky if you can recall your heroine's name.
 - Start with the heart of your pitch, one sentence that tells the editor what the story's hook is. What elements are going to make readers want to buy it? What's going to be on the back cover to attract the readers' attention? (An example of a great one-sentence pitch: *Their perfect divorce was falling apart!*)
 - Follow up with specifics. What makes your book different from every other romance? What makes it right for this line and this editor?
 - Listen carefully and take quick notes if you wish, but don't try to write down every word. A good way to make the comments stick in your mind is to paraphrase them back to the editor: "So you'd be more interested in my story if I ..." This technique also helps to ensure that you heard the editor's real message, not just your interpretation of it.
 - Be prepared with a fallback proposal. If, after your first sentence, the editor says, "We aren't looking for that kind of story just now," what are you going to do with your remaining fourteen minutes?
 - Have a finished manuscript ready to mail as soon as you get home. If the editor wants to see it (or a synopsis or samples), you don't want her to forget you or the story, or move on to another line or publisher, before you get the thing finished.
 - Don't present a manuscript at a conference, even if the editor is wildly enthusiastic and you're carrying the whole thing in your briefcase. She has luggage, and she isn't going to want to add loads of paper to it.

Remember that, no matter how it feels at the moment, the pitch is not a life-or-death moment. Don't be so nervous that you shoot yourself in the foot.

A SUCCESSFUL SUBMISSION PACKAGE

Even if you've made a successful personal pitch and the editor wants to see more about your story, she probably won't ask you to send your entire manuscript. Instead, she'll ask for a submission package, which is likely to be either a query letter or a proposal (a combination of cover letter, synopsis, and often a portion of the book). Listen closely to what the editor asks you to send, and follow instructions.

If you're submitting cold, without an invitation from an editor, you'll need to check the publisher's Web site, tip sheets, and/or market listings to see what its editors want to look at. Most often, editors expect just a query letter at first; if the editor is interested in the story, she'll request more material.

Here are the basic sales tools you should have at hand, and the things you'll most likely be requested to send.

The Query Letter

The query is a one- or two-page letter that summarizes your manuscript and indicates any particular strengths that make the author especially qualified to write this book. A query letter is roughly equivalent to a mini-synopsis and cover letter, but it is constructed in one piece rather than two. A good query letter will:

- State your story's hook.
- Summarize in one or two sentences the manuscript's strong points.
- State the number of words in the full manuscript.
- Be based on a *completed* manuscript.
- State the line it is intended to fit into, and why you feel the book belongs there.
- Give the flavor of the book (funny? dark? tender?).
- Tell the editor important things about the characters.
 - List your qualifications for writing this particular story (for example, it's a historical set in Tudor times and you have a degree in English history).
 - Briefly list your publication credits, if appropriate (any publication for which you were paid, even if it wasn't romance or fiction, is an indication of professionalism).
- Reflect your personality.

On the other hand, a good query letter will not:

- List self-published or subsidy-published works as publication credits.
- List the titles of your other, unpublished manuscripts.
- Say, "My mother thinks this is the best book ever!"
- Include a pen name.
 - Go into detail about your education or experience unless this is pertinent to the book's subject.

Basic formatting guidelines apply here, so your letter should be single-spaced in a plain twelve-point font on plain, letter-size paper, or on a simple letterhead. Do not handwrite your query letter or use odd-colored ink, graphics, gaudy stationery, or unusual type styles. Be sure to include your full name, address, phone number, and e-mail address.

To see a sample query letter based on my contemporary romance *Ties That Bind*, turn to Appendix A.

The Cover Letter

A cover letter is a one-page letter that accompanies a synopsis, sample chapters, or manuscript. (It is not necessary to include a cover letter with a query letter.) The cover letter is especially important if you're submitting to an editor who has requested to see your work, but a good cover letter can help ensure that any submission gets to the right person. It should include information similar to the basic information included in a query letter. It will:

- Remind the editor if and when she met you, or if she requested the submission based on a query letter.
- State the number of words in the full manuscript.
- Be based on a *completed* manuscript.
 - State the line it is intended to fit into and why you feel the book belongs there.
- Give the flavor of the book (funny? dark? tender?).
- Give a short (no more than two-line) description of the work.
- Give a brief summary of your qualifications and publishing credentials, if any. A good cover letter will not:
 - Include details of the story line, plot, or characters (the synopsis will do that).
 - Go into detail about how you came to write the book.
 - Be written (or appear to be written) by anyone except you, the manuscript's author.

To see a sample cover letter for *Ties That Bind*, turn to Appendix B. **The Synopsis**

A synopsis is a summary of the entire story, including the major plot events, character motivations, conflict, development of the romantic relationship, and ending. The length of a synopsis depends on the publisher and type of book, but a synopsis can range from two double-spaced pages for a short category to twenty-five pages for historical, paranormal, or single-title books.

Synopsis writing, says a Harlequin editor, “is the toughest kind of writing there is. Nobody likes it—and nobody’s particularly good at it—but it is the way hooks are sold.” Few editors can buy manuscripts entirely on their own; most take the synopses of their proposed purchases to a weekly sales or acquisition

meeting, where the summaries are passed around and discussed before the decision to acquire is made. Salable synopses are:

- **Clear.** The information is straightforward and presented in a logical manner that does not force the reader to pause to figure out what you meant.
- **Concise.** It doesn’t fill space with details, information unnecessary to the understanding of the main plot, dialogue, or introspection.
- **Complete.** It includes all the information necessary to understand the characters and the conflict, and it shows how the conflict is resolved and how the ending comes about.

An effective synopsis will address these six specific points:

- **Hook.** What’s going to appear on the back cover of the book? What element in your story is going to grab the readers and make them say, “This is so different, so unusual, so intriguing that I have to read this book”?
- **Heroine.** What makes her interesting? Physical description is usually a waste of space, as is most of the character’s history. The editor is more interested in what kind of

person the character is now and—only if it's crucial to the story—how she got that way.

- **Hero.** Why is he in opposition to the heroine? What does he want, or why does he not want the heroine to succeed?

- **Conflict.** What is the main character's difficulty at or near the start of the story? What is the problem that will keep the characters apart, force them to work together, and change their entire future?

- **Story.** How is the conflict shown to the readers? How does it intensify? How does each event affect the main characters? What twists and turns in the plot will keep the readers fascinated and unable to put the book down? Sketch the beginning, middle, and end of the story in skeletal form, while still being as specific as possible.

- **Resolution.** How is the conflict resolved? How does the ending come about? What makes the ending satisfying for the readers?

Though these six parts of the story should be addressed in order to create an effective synopsis, there is no other formula or required structure for a synopsis. So long as you include the important points, you may use your creativity to best summarize the story.

A good synopsis will:

- Be double-spaced, to allow editing in the margins and between lines.
- Be written in present tense, to create a sense of immediacy.
- Be more like a book review than a book report.
- Capture the tone of the book (i.e., the synopsis for a humorous book should have a lighthearted approach).
- Be based on a *completed* manuscript.
- Be written so its parts are roughly in proportion to the book (don't spend the first half of the synopsis on the first chapter or two of the book).
- Tell the story in a logical way, not necessarily in the same order the information is presented in the book.
- Briefly describe important characteristics of the hero and heroine.
- Show the main action sequences, to allow the editor to judge whether the story is logical and believable and whether the plot is realistic and well organized.
- Show how the conflict is resolved.
- Tell the ending and show how it is brought about. A good synopsis will not:
 - Waste words ("The story starts out with ...").
 - Include adverbs, cliches, internal monologue, dialogue, or scenic descriptions.
 - Comment about how humorous, mysterious, suspenseful, etc., the story is (let the editor be the judge).

- Leave the ending a mystery (“And to find out what happened, you’ll have to read the book!”).

To see a sample synopsis based on *Ties That Bind*, turn to Appendix C. **Cover Page**

The cover page of a manuscript is something like the title page of a book. At a glance, it gives the basic information about the manuscript and the author. It accompanies either a full manuscript or sample chapters, and it provides an easy reference for the editor when responding to the submission. The cover page should include:

- The working title of the manuscript.
- The estimated number of words in the full manuscript (not just in the submitted portion).
- Your legal name.
- Your complete address.
- A phone number where you can be reached or where a message can be left during normal business hours.
- An e-mail address, preferably one that sounds businesslike.
- The date the submission is mailed.

The cover page should not include a pen name, unless you have previously been published under that pen name.

To see a sample cover page for *Ties That Bind*, turn to Appendix D.

The Sample Chapters

When an editor asks for sample chapters, with no further definition, he expects to see the first three chapters, or approximately the first fifty pages. Some publishers specify different sorts of samples, however—they might ask for just the first chapter. Rarely, they might be even more specific, asking (for instance) for a ten-page sample that includes a love scene. Most often, however, the sample will be the very beginning of the story.

A sample from the manuscript allows the editor to observe your writing style and ability and judge how well you have carried out the promise of the synopsis. A strong writing sample will follow standard formatting guidelines and will:

- Have a good opening line/paragraph/page/chapter.
- Introduce the main characters.
- Show the characters meeting in a believable way.
 - Establish characters who have reason to like and trust each other despite their differences.
 - Establish the conflict.
 - Show a legitimate, believable, resolvable conflict, important to both hero and heroine.

- Involve the reader/editor in the story.

- Show a good command of language, with no grammatical errors, word repetitions, wordy passages, sentence fragments, etc.

- Be cleanly typed, without obvious corrections, typos, misspellings, or punctuation errors.

A good sample will not be longer than requested and will not explain the story, it will just tell it.

The Proposal

A proposal is a combination of sample chapters and a synopsis that tells how the rest of the story plays out. Its exact form varies from publisher to publisher, from author to author, and over time in an author's career. In most cases, after you've sold your first book, the publisher will not require you to write the next entire book up front, but will offer you a contract based on a proposal—usually one to three chapters, along with a synopsis telling the rest of the story. As you gain experience, the publisher is likely to agree to contracts based on shorter proposals or on a synopsis only.

Proposals should be presented just as you would present a synopsis and sample chapters, though you may be invited to submit by e-mail rather than in hard copy once you are established in your career.

Standard Manuscript Formatting

Once an editor asks to see sample chapters or a whole manuscript, you'll have to be sure you've formatted it so your presentation doesn't detract from your story. Preparing a manuscript for submission is mostly a matter of common sense, of making the pages clear, clean, and easy to read. Here are some guidelines to follow:

- Use a fixed-width font, such as Courier New, rather than a proportional font, to keep a more consistent word count per page. (In a fixed-width font, every letter takes up the same amount of space.)

- Double-space manuscript pages, leaving inch-wide margins on all sides.

- Use fresh black ink or toner. Print quality often decreases as an inkjet cartridge runs out.

- Use one side of plain white letter-size paper. Copy-machine paper is fine. (You may submit good-quality photocopies rather than originals, as long as the type is clear, black, and easy to read.)

- Put your last name and the title (or a keyword from the title) in the top left corner of each page, and the page number in the top right corner.

- Number pages consecutively throughout the manuscript; don't start over with each chapter.

- Start each chapter on a new page, spacing down a couple of inches from the top and centering the chapter number on a line by itself.

- Whether you're sending a full manuscript or sample chapters, include a cover page with your legal name, address, telephone number, e-mail address, and the estimated word count of the manuscript.
- Leave the manuscript pages unbound. You can use rubber bands to hold the materials together inside your envelope.
- Do not place a copyright notice on the manuscript or cover page. Your story is automatically protected by copyright from the moment you write it down.

Counting Your Words

Your computer word-processing program will give you a total count of the words in your manuscript. Publishers, however, use a word-counting system that takes into account the amount of space the words will occupy on the printed page. The two counts may differ widely.

A one-word line of dialogue will occupy a full line on a published page, where ten or more words would otherwise fit, so the publisher will count that one word as if it filled an entire line. A chapter may end halfway down a published page, but the next chapter will begin on a new page, so the publisher's word count is the same as if the pages were filled.

If you've used a fixed-width font (like Courier New) and one-inch margins on all sides, multiply the total number of pages in your manuscript by 250 words per page to approximate the publisher's total count.

If you're using a proportional font (like Times New Roman), count the exact number of words in three to five representative pages of your manuscript (be sure to choose full pages), then divide by the number of pages you counted to get the average number of words per page. Multiply that average by the total number of pages in your manuscript. This result will more closely approximate the publisher's word count than your word processor's word count feature.

PREPARING TO SEND OUT YOUR SUBMISSION PACKAGE

Before mailing your submission—query letter, synopsis, sample chapters, or full manuscript—check it over one last time, looking closely at each piece. If you are sending a synopsis, have you:

- Constructed a full synopsis? (If you're sending sample chapters, your synopsis should include the full story; it should not just pick up where the manuscript sample ends.)
- Made sure character motivation is clear and plot lines are resolved? If you are sending manuscript sample chapters, have you:
 - Kept your submission to the requested length?
 - Sent consecutive chapters starting with chapter one?
 - Included a love scene only if it's a part of your sample chapters or if it was specifically requested?
 - Checked dialogue tags for inappropriate word usage (one can't grin words, for

example)?

- Made sure details are consistent—that characters' names, hair colors, eye colors remain the same throughout the synopsis and sample? That time lines are accurate? That behavior is logical?

- Checked for smooth, clear transitions between scenes?

Any time you submit anything to an agent or editor, make sure you:

- Look for misspellings and grammatical errors—split infinitives, dangling participles, incorrect verb tenses or word usage.

- Make sure the story is appropriate for the line you have chosen.

- Address your letter to the correct person, and check that his title and the spelling of his name are accurate.

- Include your legal name, address, daytime telephone, and e-mail address.

- Include a self-addressed envelope large enough to hold the manuscript, with adequate postage for the manuscript's return already affixed to the envelope.

If you do not want the manuscript returned, send a business-size SASE that the agent or editor can use to send a response, and include instructions in your cover letter to destroy the manuscript rather than return it. It may be less expensive to make another copy than to pay return postage, and a returned copy may not be in suitable condition to resubmit elsewhere.

If you want confirmation of receipt, include a self-addressed, stamped postcard with the manuscript's title on the card.

Multiple Submissions

Submitting a manuscript to more than one line or publisher at a time is known as making multiple submissions. Many romance publishers decline to look at manuscripts that other publishers are also considering. Others will accept multiple

submissions if they're told ahead of time that the submission is not exclusive, and if the author agrees not to accept an offer from any publisher without notifying the others and giving them a chance to counter-offer.

Sending a manuscript off to one publisher at a time, waiting for a response, and then—if it is rejected—submitting to another is a long and tedious business. Many writers are tempted, even if the publisher's policy is to not accept multiple submissions, to do it anyway.

However, if you try this in today's smaller and more intimate publishing world, you may find yourself submitting to two different lines run by the same publisher and located in the same office complex. You won't be blacklisted if you're caught, but you'll show yourself as unprofessional and unwilling to abide by rules.

The no-multiple-submissions rule is less than fair to the writer, but it's a fact of the

publishing world. Since a specific book usually has at most three possible markets, it's not unreasonable to take them one at a time, customizing each submission to best show how the book fits into the line. Spend the waiting time working on another project.

Following Up on a Submission

Publishers usually state how long it takes for them to respond to a query or proposal in their guidelines, on their Web site, or in *Writer's Market*. Most publishers take two to three months to report; some take longer. Send a follow-up letter only after the publisher's announced time for responses has passed, and allow a couple of extra weeks before inquiring. Many publishers have a backlog of submissions.

When inquiring about the status of a submission, be sure to include the working title of the manuscript, the name of the editor to whom it was addressed, your name and contact information, and the date or approximate date when the submission was sent.

Then get busy on a new project while you wait.

THE EDITOR'S VIEW

When an editor picks up an envelope containing a submission, what factors impress her—either positively or negatively? What is she hoping to find? What sorts of story ideas appeal to her? Which ones don't? What do good submissions—those most likely to end in a published manuscript—have in common? What things should the hopeful writer avoid?

A good submission package is whatever the publisher has asked to see. In most cases, this will be a query letter or a combination of cover letter and synopsis. If you've already pitched a story to an editor, she's likely to ask for a synopsis accompanied by sample chapters.

Whatever you're submitting should be based on a finished manuscript, ready to send immediately if the editor should request it.

A successful plot does not have to be off-the-wall different. A standard story type is *often* acceptable, if the writing is good and there is a different twist to it and the style is fresh. In fact, first-time authors are often advised not to tackle something terribly controversial for the first submission.

The manuscript most likely to inspire editorial enthusiasm features:

- Good, tight writing.
- A believable, logical conflict that is important to both main characters.
- A conflict that is resolvable primarily through the characters' actions, not through the interference of others.
- A first line/paragraph/chapter that grabs attention.
- A heroine and hero who have logical, acceptable reasons to like and respect one another, as well as reasons to distrust each other, and whose attraction is not based solely on physical factors.

The manuscript most likely to be returned suffers from:

- Poor writing.
- Conflict that isn't legitimate, logical, or believable.
- Conflict that isn't important to both hero and heroine.
- Conflict based on a misunderstanding that could be resolved by discussion.
- A cliched first meeting (a car crash, etc.) unless this is handled in a fresh or different manner.
- An unbelievable or illogical first attraction between the characters.
- A plot that is different for the sake of being different rather than because conflict and characters call for it.
- A writing style that uses ten-dollar words when fifty-cent words would be better.
- A synopsis that doesn't give a full summary of the entire plot, but leaves out important elements or doesn't show how the conflict is resolved.

REJECTION LETTERS

There are two kinds of rejection letters: form letters and personal letters. Conventional wisdom has it that a personal letter is more promising than a form, but

this isn't necessarily the case. Some publishers make a point of responding to each manuscript with a personal letter, and such letters may include stock phrases just as a form rejection letter does. Certain phases that appear frequently when romance novels are returned to their authors include:

- **The characters are inconsistent.** In some way, the characters are acting inappropriately or not in the manner you indicated they would. Why is a normal, sane hero self-destructive when it comes to a certain woman? Why does the heroine walk down the dark alley when there's a lighted storefront she could go into for help?
- **The characters lack motivation.** Often this happens because you haven't asked yourself why your characters act as they do. Why does the hero spend so much time and energy preventing the heroine from reaching her goal? Why does the heroine go along with what's suggested to her rather than taking action on her own?
- **The conflict is weak.** The problem between the characters isn't important enough: There isn't enough of a difference of opinion between the characters, or enough of a conflict in their goals, or enough trouble for the characters to keep the readers interested.
- **The conflict is undeveloped.** The events don't follow logically from what has happened before. Things happen because you needed them to at that moment in the plot, rather than because of cause and effect.
- **The plot is contrived.** The plot relies on cliches, hokey devices (the heroine falling off a ladder into the hero's arms), or random events, rather than on real problems.
- **The execution is substandard.** The dialogue doesn't sound natural; characters think

in cliches or worn-out images; you have used the wrong words; grammar and punctuation errors make it difficult to follow the sense of the story; sentences are too long; or the narrative is hard to follow.

- **Not for us.** This may be a summary of the objections listed above, or it may mean that the story, while fine, isn't suited for this particular line at this time. You may have missed the distinction between two similar categories, and this book might be just right for the other one.

- **Please read our books.** The work isn't a romance, or it is so far outside the parameters the editor is looking for that it seems you are unfamiliar with the line, or perhaps even with romance novels as a whole.

- **It just didn't excite me.** There may be nothing wrong with the book, but it just doesn't have the zest and sparkle that would set it apart from the ordinary and make it a book the editor can take to the acquisition committee with enthusiasm.

REVISION REQUESTS

If an editor asks you to revise, or suggests specific changes in the manuscript, it's because she really wants you to make those changes, and she really wants to see the book again. Editors are too busy to lead people on, so they only ask for revisions if they feel a story is already in the ballpark and they hope the changes they suggest—which might be anything from tweaking to major reconstruction—will make the book something they'd be proud to publish.

Most of the time the editor is right, the suggested changes are squarely on target, and the result is a much improved story. But editors' brains have been known to short-circuit and make them say things like, “Does this story have to be an office romance in a modern-day corporation? Could it, say, be moved to the Old West and be a time travel?” (Well, yes, it *could*—but it would be an entirely different story, and probably it would be more practical to start from scratch than to revise.)

If an editor asks you for revisions, never say no. Say you'll have to think about it, and then really think. Will those changes make the story better, stronger, and salable? If you feel the suggested changes aren't feasible, is there a compromise position you can offer? If you really can't make the changes without sacrificing the integrity of your story, then say so. Be up front but polite; you may want to work with this person in the future.

Your first reaction to any request for revisions is apt to be negative—*What's wrong with the editor that she can't see my story for the jewel it is?*—but if you take a bit of time, and if you've given yourself some distance from the story, you may see that she's right and what you actually put on the page isn't quite the polished diamond you believed.

If an editor requests revisions from you, figure out a feasible timetable, tell the editor when she can expect to see the revised manuscript—and then stick to the deadline. Don't delay; get the book back to the editor as soon as you reasonably can, before she can move on to another job or forget that she asked.

BEING A PROFESSIONAL WRITER

The professional writer isn't necessarily someone who's quit a day job to write full time. The difference between hobbyists who write stories in their spare time and authors who have put themselves in the marketplace is an attitude of professionalism.

Most rules for dealing with editors and publishers are a matter of common sense and courtesy. Before you send off a letter, consider how you would react if someone had sent the same letter to you. Treat the editor with the same respect you'd like to receive.

From the first query letter, you should strive to present yourself as a professional who is knowledgeable about the field, respectful of the editor's time, serious about writing, reasonable to deal with, and intelligent.

If you work with an editor through several projects, a friendship may develop, but it's important to remember that your working relationship must be kept separate from your friendship. Though your editor may sometimes act as your advocate with his superiors, his first duty has to be to his employer—who is not only in the business of publishing books, but of producing a product that will make money.

Your editor is your partner, not your opponent. A wise author remembers that while author and editor may not always agree, their goal is always the same: to produce the best possible book for the readers' enjoyment.

Meeting Deadlines

Part of this cooperative arrangement includes doing your work on time. It's your job to keep to your contract by meeting the deadline, and failing to do so because you didn't feel like working is not only unprofessional, it can be deadly to a career.

Deadlines are set through discussion between the writer and the editor and are spelled out in the contract. When you're negotiating deadlines, don't automatically agree to the editor's suggestion. Be reasonable with yourself, be realistic about what you can accomplish, and build in some extra time for emergencies. With luck, you won't need the safety margin, and turning work in early builds your professional relationship with your editor.

If circumstances like personal illness are going to prevent you from meeting a deadline, inform the editor as early as possible—when publication schedules can still be juggled. If you try to cover up the failing by making excuses or sending in substandard or unfinished work, you'll build yourself a reputation as unreliable, if not worse. Writers who can't be relied on to produce aren't asked to do the special projects that are very important career-builders.

Even before you're published, you can do a lot to build a professional attitude toward meeting deadlines. You can set your own due dates, or answer to a fellow writer or critique partner. And when you pitch a story to an editor and she says she'd like to read it, you'll be far ahead of the game if you tell her she'll have it in two weeks and you can follow through on it.

The Can-Do Attitude

An I-can-do-that attitude will take you a long way. Be willing to listen to the editor's

ideas, cooperate whenever possible with his requests, and if cooperation

is impossible or if you disagree with the editor's suggestion, give logical reasons for your refusal.

Even when you find it necessary to disagree, you can do so without being disagreeable. The successful author does not ever flatly refuse to make changes or revisions. If you disagree with an editor's requests, respectfully present your case, detail your reasons, and offer an alternate solution.

Growing and Stretching

It's impossible to stay at a certain level of competence as a writer. You either stretch, grow, and improve, or you slide downhill. Unless you are willing to learn with every new manuscript, you may find that publication is no guarantee of continued success. Remember, you are only as good as your latest story.

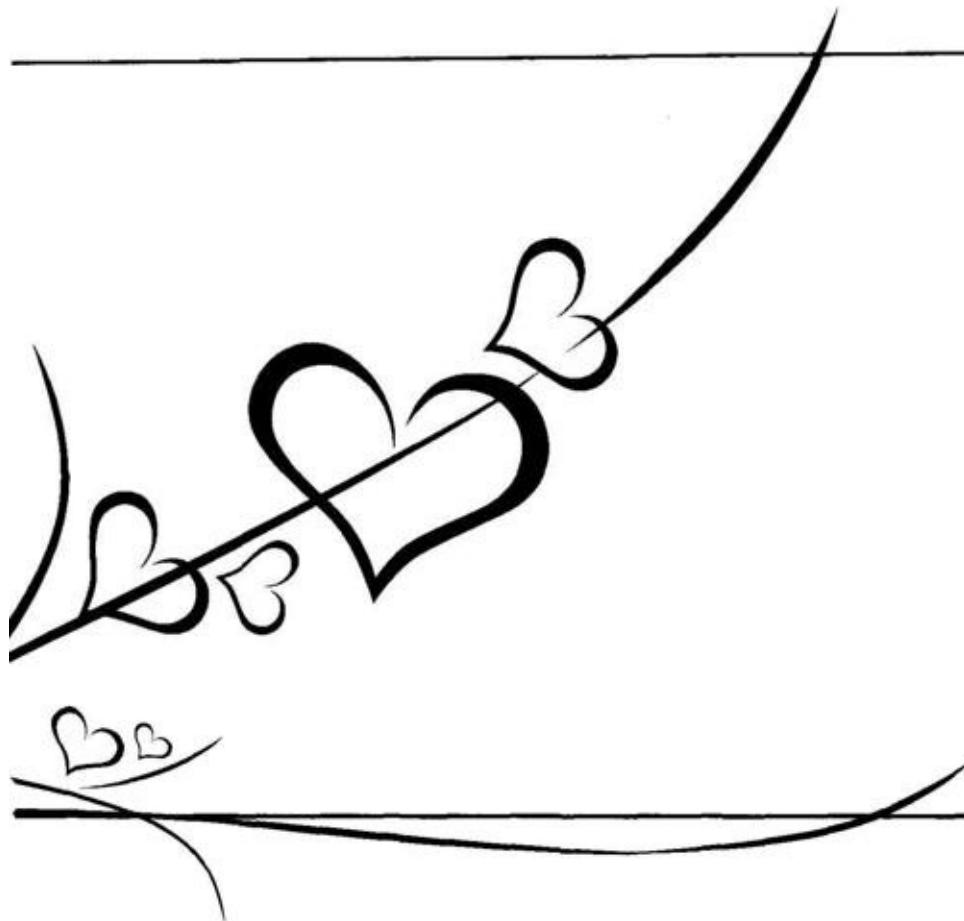
The Writer's Life

Writing a romance is fun, challenging, aggravating, and satisfying—sometimes all in the same moment. Your characters can thrill you, frighten you, amaze you, and make you want to tear your hair out. Your story will be exciting and frustrating in turns, and some days you'll just want to turn your back on your work and never pick it up again.

But in the end, writers write—while amateurs talk and think and dream about writing.

part five

Appendices and References



appendix a

The Query Letter



Juana B. Writer
321 Lovers Lane
Hartsville, IA 55555
(555) 555-5555

[date]

Ms. Buya Booke
Senior Editor
Lovelorn Romance
123 Story Lane
New York, NY 10000

Dear Ms. Booke:

May I have a few moments of your time to submit a story for your consideration?

Ties That Bind is a sweet traditional romance, about 53,000 words, intended for Lovelorn Romance's Hometown line. The full manuscript recently received an honorable mention in the Waytago Romance Contest sponsored by the National Organization of Romantics.

Abbey Stafford is stunned when her widowed mother, Janice, announces that she's marrying the neighborhood handyman. Abbey's a bit

of a snob, but she's completely honest about her reasons for opposing the match. She doesn't object to Frank Granger's occupation, she just doubts that her cultured and socially active mother can find happiness with a man who mends toilets for a living.

Abbey joins forces with Frank's son Flynn—her old nemesis from her high school days—to try to break up Janice and Frank. Flynn is also in favor of destroying the romance—because, he says, he would hate to have to face Abbey over the family dinner table at every holiday celebration.

Abbey tries to force Janice to see that Frank doesn't fit with her friends by throwing an elaborate after-symphony party. But Janice and Frank simply use the party as an excuse to announce their engagement.

Flynn suggests that he and Abbey feign a flaming public affair, because their children embarrassing them will surely cause a rift between Janice and Frank. When Abbey rejects that plan, his second brainstorm is a camping trip to show Janice that she doesn't fit into Frank's world. But that plan goes awry when Janice has a great time.

During the camping trip, Abbey realizes that she must accept her mother's decisions or lose her altogether. But Flynn, angry at the half-hearted way in which Abbey has made her peace, points out her snobbishness and leaves the camp.

His action forces Abbey to confront her attitudes not only toward Janice and Frank but toward Flynn himself, and she realizes she's fallen in love with him. However, she fears that her attitude has eliminated any chance that he might love her in return. She will have to adjust to having the man she loves as a stepbrother. To conceal her feelings, she tries to reestablish their earlier flirtatious exchanges.

The love she feels for Flynn helps Abbey understand her mother's feelings for Frank, and she begins to open her heart to him as well. But her easy flirting has sent mixed signals to Flynn. On the morning of her mother's wedding, Abbey is still trying to conceal her real feelings, but trips herself up when Flynn kisses her. Confused by the changes he's seen in her behavior, he challenges her to tell him the truth, and, surrounded by wedding guests, they admit they've both fallen in love.

Ties That Bind is a family-oriented story with a great deal of humor, about a well-meaning but difficult heroine coming to terms with her shortcomings and growing into a loving woman.

I hope you'll like meeting Abbey and Flynn. The manuscript is complete, and I would be delighted to submit it immediately upon request.

Sincerely,

Juana B. Writer
321 Lovers Lane
Hartsville, IA 55555
(555) 555-5555
juanabwriter@mywebsite.com

The query letter starts with a polite greeting and immediately gives the main information about the book—story type, targeted line, word count—and the fact that it has placed in a contest, which immediately gives more credibility to the author.

Then the letter segues into a quick synopsis of the story, including the main turning points of the plot and how those affect the main characters, along with a hint of the story's tone (mending toilets for a living, Flynn's motivation to sidetrack the romance). Note that the story's ending and what brings it about are included.

The quick finish specifies that the manuscript is complete and can be mailed on request. The author's name and contact information are clear.



appendix b

The Cover Letter



Juana B. Writer
321 Lovers Lane
Hartsville, IA 55555
(555) 555-5555

[date]

Ms. Buya Booke
Senior Editor
Lovelorn Romance
123 Story Lane
New York, NY 10000

Dear Ms. Booke:

I'm enclosing the synopsis of my sweet traditional romance, *Ties That Blind*, for your consideration for Lovelorn Romance's Hometown line. The complete manuscript contains about 53,000 words.

We last met at the 2007 convention of the National Organization of Romantics, and though the idea I pitched to you at that time wasn't quite what you were looking for, you made encouraging comments about my style and the humor in my stories.

Ties That Blind is a family-oriented story with a great deal of humor, about a well-meaning but difficult heroine coming to terms with her short-

comings and growing into a loving woman. The full manuscript recently received an honorable mention in the Waytago Romance Contest sponsored by the National Organization of Romantics.

The manuscript is complete, and I would be delighted to submit it immediately upon request.

Sincerely,

Juana B. Writer
321 Lovers Lane
Hartsville, IA 55555
(555) 555-5555
juanabwriter@mywebsite.com

This cover letter immediately gives the main information about the book—story type, targeted line, word count—and reminds the editor of a previous meeting with enough detail that she's likely to remember the writer.

The letter then gives a thumbnail sketch of the book (handy in case the letter and synopsis are separated) and mentions the fact that the manuscript has placed in a contest, which immediately gives more credibility to the author.

The quick finish specifies that the manuscript is complete and can be mailed on request. The author's name and contact information are clear.



appendix c

The Synopsis



It's a shock to Abbey Stafford when her widowed mother, Janice, announces that she's getting married again—to the neighborhood handyman. Abbey doesn't object to Frank Granger's occupation, but how can the socially prominent and cultured Janice find happiness with a man who mends toilets for a living?

Abbey goes looking for Frank's son Flynn—her old nemesis from school days—for assistance in trying to break up Janice and Frank. Flynn is quite willing to combine forces with Abbey to destroy the romance—because, he says, he would hate to have to face Abbey over the family dinner table at every holiday celebration.

But Abbey's plan to show Janice that Frank doesn't fit with her friends—an elaborate after-symphony party—comes to nothing when Janice and Frank take advantage of the party to announce their engagement. Flynn offers an alternative plan, that he and Abbey feign a flaming public affair that will cause a rift between Janice and Frank. When Abbey rejects that plan, his second brainstorm is a camping trip. He's assuming that the moment the elegant Janice is expected to bait her own fishhook, she'll back out. But that plan too goes awry when Janice has a great time.

During the camping trip, Abbey realizes that she must accept her mother's decisions or lose her altogether, and she reluctantly gives her blessing to Frank and Janice's relationship.

When she confesses her change of heart to Flynn, however, he is angry at the halfhearted way in which Abbey has made her peace, and the ensuing argument drives him to leave the camp early, which in turn causes Abbey to realize that she has fallen in love with Flynn.

But Abbey fears that her attitude has eliminated any chance that Flynn might love her in return; she will have to adjust to having the man she loves as a stepbrother. Abbey tries to reestablish a family-level relationship with Flynn, without letting him guess that she feels more than sisterly affection, by trying to return to the easy flirtatious conduct of their early friendship.

Her love for Flynn helps Abbey understand her mother's feelings for Frank, and she begins to open her heart to him as well. Flynn sees the changes in her, but her easy flirting has sent mixed signals, confusing him about how she really feels.

On the morning of Frank and Janice's wedding, Abbey is still trying to conceal her real feelings, but she trips herself up when Flynn kisses her. In the middle of Frank and Janice's wedding reception, Flynn challenges Abbey to tell the truth and confesses his own love for her. Surrounded by the wedding guests, they sort out their love for each other and start to plan another wedding.

The synopsis opens with the heroine's short-term problem and immediately introduces

the main characters. It includes the main events of the plot, telling about the episodes in a lighthearted way that mimics the overall tone of the story. It shares the changes of heart experienced by the heroine, and explains why her attitude changes. It also includes the hero's view of events and his reasons for confusion and delay, and goes into some detail about the ending and what brings it about.



appendix d

The Cover Page



Ties That Bind

53,000 words

submitted [date]
for the Hometown line

By
Juana B. Writer

321 Lovers Lane
Hartsville, IA 55555
(555) 555-5555
Fax: (555) 555-5556
juanabwriter@mywebsite.com

The cover page includes crucial data about the manuscript and about the author, including full contact information. Having the date the manuscript was submitted assists the publisher in making a timely response.